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APRIL / MAY 1994 NO. 2

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APRIL/MAY 1994 ISSUE 2

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Cover photo, John Kane; inset, Ruth Lively.

This page: top, Susan Kahn; center, Sloan Howard; bottom, John Kane.

Back cover photo, Susan Kahn.

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## LETTERS

We invite you to share your thoughts, opinions, and comments with fellow readers. Please send your cards or letters to Letters, *Fine Cooking*, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506.

### CUISINART'S POWER STRAINER FOR PURÉEING

The article "Tools for Puréeing" in *Fine Cooking* #1 omitted one tool that I find essential and unsurpassed for many processing tasks. Cuisinart's Power Strainer attachment is my number one choice for painlessly eliminating skin, seeds, and stones from cooked fruit and for producing purées of unrivaled smoothness. It's quick, easy to use, cleans up in moments, and is notably quiet. To use the Power Strainer, you need Cuisinart's Citrus Juicer attachment. If your local Cuisinart dealer doesn't stock them, both the Power Strainer and the Citrus Juicer attachment are available by mail order from Culinary Parts Unlimited, 80 Berry Drive, Pacheco, CA 94553; 800/543-7549.

—Amanda Burton, Emeryville, CA

### GLUTEN DEVELOPMENT EQUIPMENT

I was very interested by the Food Science piece on gluten by Professor Joseph G. Ponte, Jr. (*Fine Cooking* #1, pp. 14–16). I often make bread and have wondered about recipes that caution against over-kneading. Professor Ponte mentions a device used by baking technologists to test gluten development in dough. What is this equipment called, how much does it cost, and, if it's not too expensive, how could I buy it?

—Joan Black, Easton, CT

**Joseph Ponte, Jr., replies:** We use several instruments to measure gluten development in dough as it's being mixed. Since these instruments cost several thousand dollars each, I wouldn't recommend them for a home baker. If you make dough in an electric mixer, you can take a more empirical approach by timing how long it takes to knead the dough until it's satiny smooth. Then bake the bread and see how well it rises and what the crumb texture is. The next time you make that bread, knead it for 10 percent less time, bake it, and evaluate the results. The

third time, knead it for 10 percent longer. You'll build up the experience to know when dough is properly kneaded.

Another option is a new mixer being developed by the K-Tec company in Orum, Utah. As gluten develops, bread dough becomes stiffer; once gluten has passed its peak development, the dough begins to relax and soften, requiring less power from the mixer. The K-Tec mixer employs a computer chip that tracks how much power is needed to mix the dough, allowing you to stop mixing as soon as the dough shows signs of softening. For more information on the K-Tec, call Charlie Coombs at 800/748-5400.

### WHAT BOOKS DO CHEFS READ?

I was happy to see Yamuna Devi's *The Art of Indian Vegetarian Cooking* reviewed in *Fine Cooking* #1, and I liked the thematic approach to the reviews and the fact that older books as well as more recently published ones were included. I'm curious about what chefs read and refer to. Could you ask cooking professionals to write about their cookbook libraries? Each cook could highlight a few books, either general reference books or books on special topics, or even just one crucial text (even if it's out of print), and tell why the books are useful, mention a few techniques they teach, and name a few recipes from them that sing.

—Joanne Bouknight, Greenwich, CT

### UNWISE FERN CHOICE

I've enjoyed reading the interesting, new magazine *Fine Cooking*. However, I must comment on a reply concerning fiddlehead ferns. The ferns most commonly sold and used for eating in this country are ostrich ferns, not bracken. Members of the American Fern Society state that bracken is considered a possible carcinogenic, and discourage using them.

—Virginia D. Otto, Westborough, MA

**Editor's note:** We mistakenly added a reference to bracken ferns to Jasper White's reply. Ostrich fiddleheads, or *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, are in fact the kind of fern most commonly sold fresh and canned. John Kallas of Wild Food Adventures in Portland, Oregon, suggests that you buy fiddleheads only from foragers who can identify them by their scientific name. ♦

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## REHEATING BREAD IN THE MICROWAVE

*When I microwave bread products, they always end up tough and rubbery. Why does this happen? Is there a way I can heat bread in a microwave successfully, or do I have to heat it in the oven?*

—Jennifer Stevens, Chicago, IL

**Robert Schiffmann replies:** Bread products can be reheated in the microwave without becoming tough. The trick is to wrap them in a paper towel and microwave them very briefly—five to ten seconds per roll or slice of bread. The paper towel acts as a barrier to keep the moisture in, yet it doesn't cause moisture to condense on the outside of the bread the way plastic wrap does. The bread will feel barely warm when you take it out of the microwave because the heat is concentrated in the center, but by the time you get it to the table, the heat will have redistributed more evenly.

Bread products become tough only when they're microwaved for too long. Foodscientists are researching and debating why microwaving toughens bread. Some believe it has to do with the way microwaves act on starch, while others think the gluten proteins may be responsible.

Hard and stale bread products don't reheat well at all in the microwave, so warm them in a regular oven. The heat in a regular oven softens the starch in stale bread and makes it taste moist and

tender. For reasons not well understood, the energy from a microwave doesn't.

A final caution: be careful when microwaving baked products with icings, high sugar-based fillings, or dried fruit like raisins. These ingredients can heat very fast and may become very hot while the bread or cake portion stays much cooler. So use very little microwave time, and be careful when you take a bite.

Robert Schiffmann is a consultant to the microwave industry in New York City.

## SWEATING INGREDIENTS

*In recipes, I sometimes see the instruction to "sweat" onions and other vegetables before adding the rest of the ingredients. What does this mean?*

—Jill Lenkh, Denver, CO

**Keith Coughenour replies:** Sweating is a cooking technique in which an ingredient—usually a sliced or diced vegetable—is cooked in a very small amount of fat over low heat. This slow cooking softens the ingredient and develops its flavors. Typically, aromatic vegetables, like carrots, onions, shallots, and leeks, are sweated because they develop a desirable mellow sweetness when slowly cooked. Sweating aromatics to draw out their flavors is an important preliminary step when making sauces.

When you sweat something, you don't want to give it any color—this is not browning—you just want to soften the texture and, in the case of members of the onion family, let it turn translucent. To this end, use very low heat, stir the items occasionally, and take your time.

Sweat vegetables in a covered frying or sauté pan, or a larger saucepan as long as it has a heavy base to prevent scorch-

ing. The cover keeps moisture in so the ingredients soften and don't burn. For even moister cooking, cover the ingredients with a circle of parchment paper before putting on the lid.

While ingredients are usually sweated in a small quantity of oil, which prevents them from burning, you can also sweat them in a little stock or water, if you need to reduce the amount of fat in your recipe.

Keith Coughenour, CC, is Executive Chef of The Duquesne Club in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

## STORING WHOLE-WHEAT FLOUR

*I've heard that whole-wheat flour can go stale. Is this true? Does this happen with other flours? How long does it keep without losing quality, and what is the best way to store it?*

—Barbara McWilliams, Gainesville, FL

**Brinna Sands replies:** Whole-wheat and other whole-grain flours, which contain the oil-rich germ of the grain berry, do not go stale, but their oils can become rancid. Once you rupture the oily germ of the berry, which happens when you grind it into flour, the oils are exposed to air and thus subject to oxidation. The result is that those oils will slowly become rancid. Freshly ground whole grains, if they are stored where it is cool and dry (not summer storage conditions), will keep for about three months. In the refrigerator, if stored in an airtight container, they'll keep for six months. Freezing will increase even further the storage life of whole grains, particularly if your freezer is one

(Continued on page 8)

## Taunton PUBLICATIONS

for fellow enthusiasts

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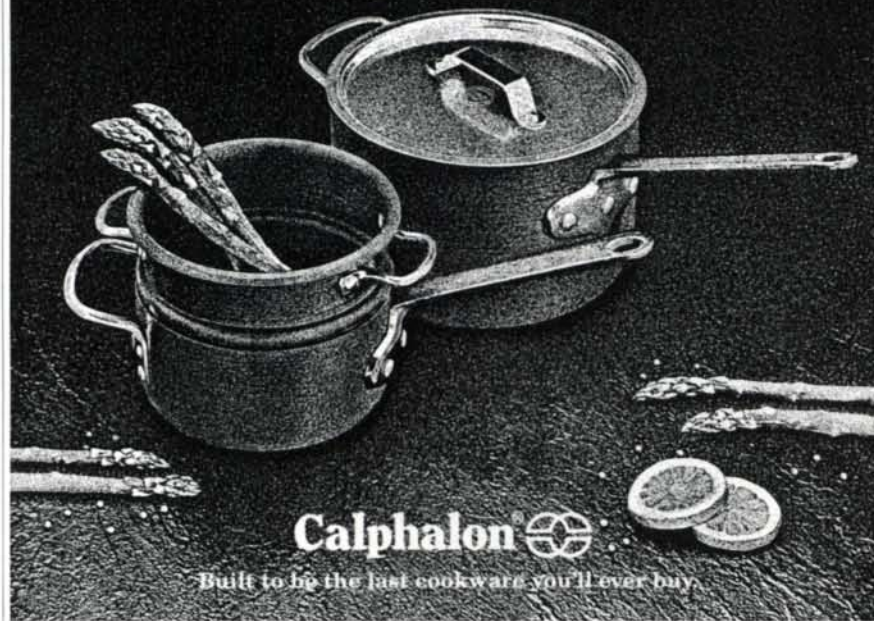
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with a stable internal temperature (that is, one that isn't self-defrosting). But freezing won't stop oxidation entirely.

Flours that don't contain the germ, such as all-purpose bleached or unbleached, bread, and rye, all can be stored indefinitely in a cool and dry place. Tuck in a bay leaf to discourage any grain-moth "visitors." When you're dealing with whole grains, it's best to buy small amounts often and use them up in something wonderful while they still taste that way.

*Brinna Sands is the vice president of Sands, Taylor, and Wood, the producers of King Arthur Flour.*

### STORING LEFTOVER WINE

*How can I best keep an unfinished bottle of wine, and for how long can I expect it to be good? Are there some wines that keep better than others?*

—Mary Beth Waitt, Boston, MA

**Mark Wessels replies:** When you drink half a bottle of wine, what you have left over is half wine and half air. Oxygen in the air slowly but steadily turns wine into vinegar. Some wines naturally keep better than others. Wines with a higher acid content, say German rieslings, keep better than lower-acid wines, like California chardonnays. Red wines with more tannins, such as cabernet sauvignons, tend to keep better than less tannic wines, like beaujolais. Sugar and alcohol act as natural preservatives also; therefore, sweet wines keep better than dry wines, and fortified wines, such as port and sherry, keep better than table wines. If you find yourself with an unfinished bottle of table wine, here are several options for keeping it fresh for a few days.

Since wine oxidizes at a slower rate at cooler temperatures, the simplest option is to recork the bottle and refrigerate it. Refrigeration works better for younger wines than for older wines, but with all wines you'll notice their flavor has soured and deteriorated after a day or two.

Your second option is to pour the leftover wine into a smaller container. Since oxygen is the culprit, it's much better to have a small bottle that's full than a larger bottle that's only half full. Keep a couple of empty 12-ounce, screw-top, soft-drink bottles on hand for this purpose. Simply fill the small bottle as much as possible,

screw the top back on, and place it in the refrigerator. I've kept wine for several weeks this way with little deterioration.

Third, you can get a Vacu-Vin, a hand-held plastic pump that pumps the air out of the wine bottle and seals it with a rubber stopper. I find this system works well for about three days, after which air does begin to seep back into the bottle.

Fourth, you can buy Private Preserve, a small can of a nitrogen and carbon dioxide. Point the nozzle of the can into your open bottle of wine, give it a couple of quick bursts, and immediately stick the cork back into the bottle. Since the gas mixture is heavier than air, it replaces most of the oxygen in the bottle with a blanket of inert, tasteless, odorless, non-toxic, and nonflammable gas that retards oxidation. Each can of Private Preserve will preserve approximately 48 bottles of wine. Theoretically this will keep a bottle fresh for several weeks. Vacu-Vin and Private Preserve can be found at most wine shops or kitchen-supply stores.

Your final option is to freeze the unfinished bottle of wine. This will certainly retard oxidation, but I find it to be a bit inconvenient when it comes time to drink the remaining wine. Some people swear by this method. They simply thaw out the wine in the microwave and report little difference in taste from before freezing. I do recommend this method for storing wine for cooking. I keep a couple of 8-ounce plastic cups of wine in the freezer next to the chicken and beef stock.

None of these methods works for preserving sparkling wines.

*Mark Wessels is a wine consultant at MacArthur Liquors in Washington, DC.*

### ROASTING COFFEE AT HOME

*I've read about people roasting green coffee beans, and I'm intrigued. Is it worth it? How do I do it?*

—Jon Abernathy, Yakima, WA

**Drew Allen replies:** Grinding your coffee at home is well and good, but roasting it to order is even better. Coffee begins to lose its flavor as soon as it's roasted. But unroasted, green coffee beans keep indefinitely and even improve with age. Any shop that roasts its own coffee beans should be able to sell them to you green.

To roast coffee at home, put a heavy,

cast-iron frying pan or Dutch oven over moderate heat, pour in as many coffee beans as you'll need for the day, and stir with a wooden spoon, more or less constantly, until the beans are dark and shiny with oil. The process should take 20 to 25 minutes for two pots' worth of coffee. The beans probably won't darken evenly because of their different sizes and moisture content, but it doesn't really matter and can even add interest to the flavor. Chew a few beans as they brown to taste how the flavor changes. To see how your home-roasting compares to the coffee shop's, buy some of the same variety of coffee already roasted and conduct your own taste test. Roasting coffee is a wonderfully satisfying activity for a weekend morning, remarkably effective at creating pleasant memories for others.

*Drew Allen, owner of the Liberty Bar in San Antonio, Texas, has been roasting coffee at home all his life.*

### SPRING LAMB

*What is spring lamb? When does lamb become mutton?*

—Julia Putnam, Milwaukee, WI

**Priscilla Root replies:** The term "spring lamb" really doesn't have a meaning in today's market. The idea of eating lamb in the spring is a remnant of traditional farming days when lambs were born in spring and then eaten a few months later. Nowadays, lamb is produced year-round, so young lamb is available in any season. The USDA states that the term "lamb" may be used for an animal under twelve months old. Older than that, the meat is called "mutton." The average age of lamb on the market shelves is about five months old.

*Priscilla Root is the Director of Product Publicity at the American Lamb Council in Englewood, Colorado. ♦*

### CORRECTION TO ISSUE #1

In Shirley Sarvis' reply to "What to drink with cake," we transposed the terms in her discussion on the sweetness level of sparkling wines other than champagne. The sentence should read, "With other sparkling wines, the label designations are Extra Dry and Brut, with Extra Dry being the sweeter."





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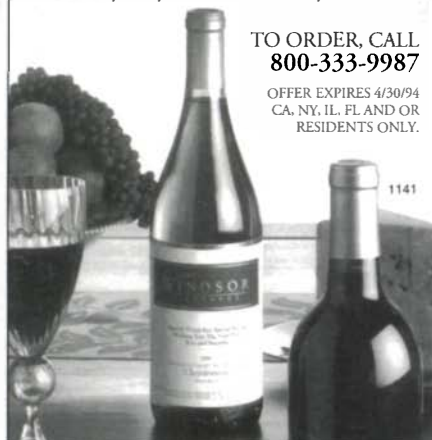
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## Roasted Pumpkinseed Oil

The flavor of pumpkinseeds, or *pepitas*, is integral to many Texan and Mexican dishes that I cook, so I was eager to try Biolandbau's Pumpkinseed Oil, imported from Austria.

The oil has a marvelous, rich, velvety-thick texture and a dark roasted-green color. Dime-size drops held their shape well on a plate. It has a bold, toasted taste up front with a round, mellow, nutty, pumpkin finish. The pumpkinseed oil has such strong character that it can be thinned by half with a less expensive oil, such as olive or safflower, and still retain its flavor and color.

I tried cooking with the oil, but when it got hotter than 375° to 400°F, it deteriorated rapidly, becoming smoky and charred. I think the oil tastes best in its raw, natural state, treated the same way I'd treat a dark, roasted sesame oil.

The first thing I made with the oil was a chipotle-lime aioli, with ½ cup pumpkinseed oil, two chipotle chile peppers, one lime, ¼ cup roasted garlic, and no eggs. The flavor was great—the smoky spiciness of the chipotles and the zestiness of the lime juice complemented the silky nuttiness of the oil. The greenish brown color wasn't the most appealing, but I could see it working as a garnish for white bean soup or chicken quesadillas.

Next I whipped up a cracked-pepper vinaigrette with fresh basil, black pepper, balsamic vinegar, pumpkinseed oil, garlic, and fresh ginger—wonderful.

I also tried a cilantro pesto with pecorino cheese, almonds, cilantro, a little lime juice, and bound it together with the pumpkinseed oil. The pesto was delicious tossed with penne pasta and as a marinade for grilled chicken.

Biolandbau's Pumpkinseed Oil is available in 250ml (8.5-ounce) and 500ml (16.9-ounce) bottles for \$7.50 and \$15, respectively. To find out where to get it locally, or to order by mail, call Avocet Trading at 201/659-2497.

—Jay McCarthy, Executive Chef at Cascabel in San Antonio, Texas



## Powerful Blender from KitchenAid

KitchenAid's Ultra Power Blender jumps to a powerful start, whether crushing ice or puréeing soup. As the blender works, a computer chip senses how much muscle is needed and adjusts accordingly.

The KitchenAid blender's shape is unconventional, with extra long blades sitting on a dome-shaped base inside a squat glass jar. The jar's wide bottom and straight sides make it easy to scrape out the contents with a spoon or spatula, without having to dig under the blades.

Anyone who has tried to clean the crud from the front of a blender with a zillion buttons will appreciate the flush electronic control panel on the KitchenAid, which has settings for continuous blending and pulse control.

The parts of the KitchenAid blender snap together quite easily. The hard plastic, nonstaining lid twists on securely, rather than just sitting on top like other blenders. The 48-inch cord coils into a slot under the base when it isn't needed.

As good as the KitchenAid is, it's still a blender, and it can't do some things as well as a food processor can, like make fresh bread crumbs or purée chickpeas for hummus. But if you're looking for a new bar blender, or are tired of your puréed soups oozing out of the central hole of your food processor, you'll want to check out this blender.

The five-speed Ultra-Power Blender shown here and the three-speed Classic list for \$139 and \$119, respectively, and are available in many stores that carry small appliances. For more information, call KitchenAid's Customer Assistance Center at 800/422-1230.

—Suzanne Roman, Fine Cooking



## Chefs Collaborate to Compose Creed

"Sound food choices emphasize locally grown, seasonally fresh, and whole or minimally processed ingredients.

"Good food begins with unpolluted air, land, and water, environmentally sustainable farming and fishing, and humane animal husbandry.

"The healthy, traditional diets of many cultures offer abundant evidence

that fruits, vegetables, beans, breads, and grains are the foundation of good diets."

Hundreds of chefs across the country have accepted these and five other principles as part of the *Chefs Collaborative: 2000*, an educational initiative sponsored by Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust.

Since drawing up the charter and statement of principles in Hawaii last July at Oldways' *Food Choices: 2000* symposium, chefs attending the conference have circulated the charter to chefs who didn't attend for comment and refinement, and to get them to sign on. Now the chefs are forming local chapters of *Chefs Collaborative: 2000* to raise awareness about how the food we cook affects our health and environment.

The collaborative is coordinated by Oldways, a four-year-old nonprofit educational organization based in Boston. Oldways works to preserve the healthy, environmentally sustainable food and agricultural traditions of many cultures, and to make the lessons of these traditions more widely accessible by organizing international symposia and creating educational programs. Upcoming symposia will be held in San Francisco, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Crete, and Morocco.

For more information, contact Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust, 45 Milk Street, Boston, MA 02109; 617/695-2300.

—Suzanne Roman, Fine Cooking ♦



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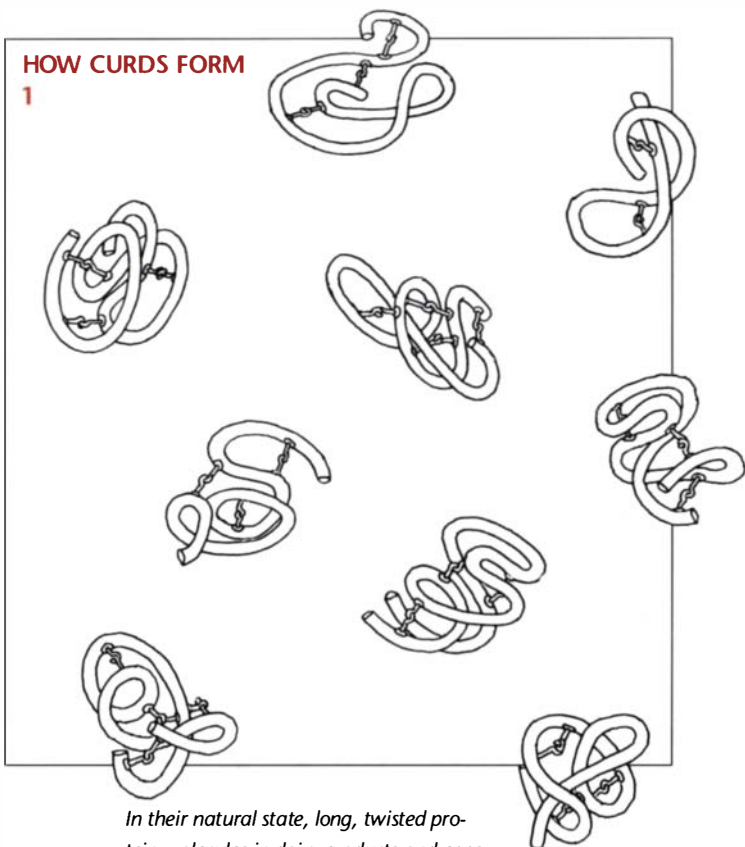




# Curdled custards and broken cream sauces

## HOW CURDS FORM

1



In their natural state, long, twisted protein molecules in dairy products and eggs have bonds across their curls, forming individual wads.

Cooking with dairy products and eggs can be a nightmare. If you've ever had yogurt curdle when you stirred it into a hot dish or had a custard turn into scrambled eggs, you know what I mean. In both of these cases, proteins in the milk and eggs changed from their natural state and clumped together to form curds. But this joining together of proteins—coagulation—isn't always bad. Custards set as the proteins in the milk and eggs pull together. Yogurt and sour cream wouldn't have their thick consistencies without the clotting action of proteins. Much of cooking with eggs and cream involves preventing milk and eggs from curdling when you don't want them to, and helping them coagulate smoothly and evenly when you do.

**Heating causes coagulation**—Proteins are long molecules that curl around like springs or fold back on themselves in a great wad. These springs or wads have bonds across their coils that hold

each protein in a tightly bound unit (see illustration #1 at left). In their natural state, the individual protein molecules repel each other and stay separate. There's even room for light to pass between them, which is why you can see through raw egg white.

When proteins are heated, however, the bonds holding them in a tight unit pop apart, and the protein molecules unwind (see illustration #2 at right). These unwound (or *denatured*) proteins float about with their bonds sticking out, looking for other molecules to bond with. They soon collide and join with other denatured proteins. They initially bond together in a

loose mesh with water trapped in the mesh. This is the point at which a custard becomes smooth and soft, and a hollandaise sauce becomes smooth and thick. If heating continues, the bonds tighten up and squeeze out the water (see illustration #3, far right). Then the proteins become firm and dry, and you'll find your custard has broken and your hollandaise has turned into scrambled eggs. The tighter the bonds between the proteins, the harder the curd. To watch proteins denature and bond over heat, just fry an egg. The egg white turns opaque as the proteins pull together and block out light.

**Other agents of coagulation**—Acidic ingredients also cause the bonds holding the proteins in individual units to break, allowing the proteins to unwind and some to join together. With milk products this is often desirable. In fact, sour cream, *crème fraîche*, yogurt, and buttermilk are made by introducing acid-producing bacteria that thicken or partially curdle them. Since these cultured dairy products have proteins that are al-

ready partially unwound, they curdle very easily when heated.

Both the alcohol and tannins in wine can cause proteins to unwind and curdle. In classic reduction sauces, the cook deglazes the pan drippings with wine, adds a little stock, boils a minute or two, and then adds cream and reduces the sauce. If you add the cream first or add the cream and wine together, curds may form. But if you boil the wine for a minute first, the bulk of the alcohol will evaporate and the tannins will combine with other compounds so that they won't affect the cream when it's added. Sometimes when making a sauce, even the salt in the stock can cause a low-fat dairy product to curdle.

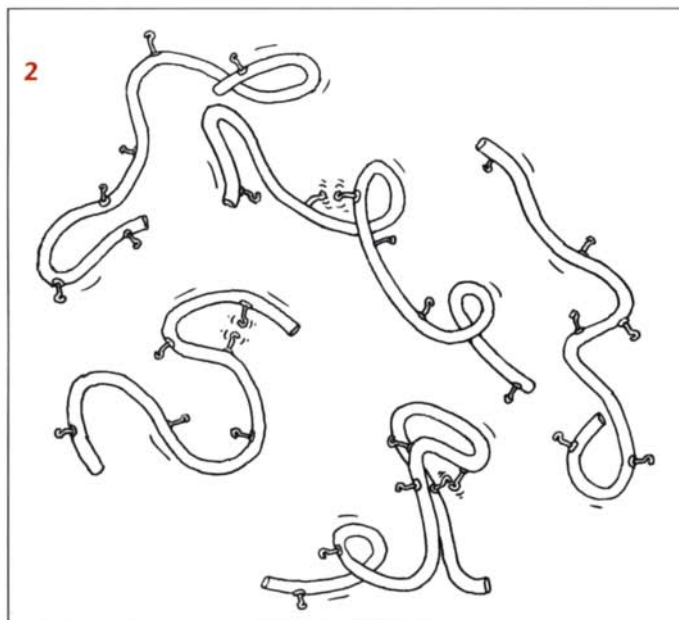
Enzymes also make proteins coagulate. In fact, cheesemaking utilizes the enzyme rennin to create curds in milk.

**Gentle heat gives you better control of coagulation**—The trick to protein cookery is to be gentle. You want just enough heat or acid to make the proteins unwind and join together loosely.

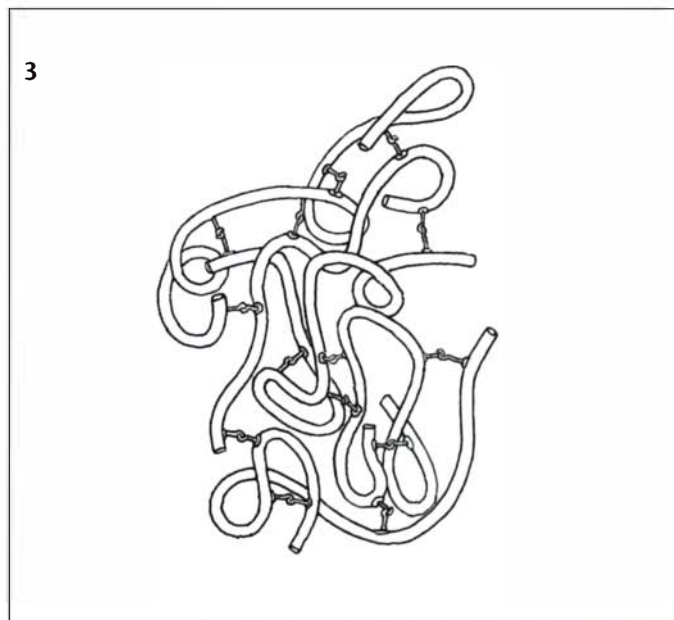
The temperature at which proteins coagulate varies depending on how fast the mixture is heated. If you heat a delicate, egg and milk custard (*crème anglaise*) slowly over a double boiler and stir constantly, the custard begins thickening around 160°F and gets to a good "coat-your-spoon" thickness in the 170s. You have an ample window from the time it thickens until it goes to scrambled eggs at 180°. However, if you heat the same custard over direct, high heat, the custard doesn't start to thicken in the 160s. In fact, it doesn't begin to thicken until it reaches 179°. You have only 1° of safety to take it off the stove before it goes to scrambled eggs.

Proteins need gentle heat in the oven also. By baking custards in a water bath, you'll avoid the holes that form in the custard when the proteins get too hot and pull tightly together, leaving behind a space. You'll also have longer to remove the custard before it overcooks and turns rubbery.

**Preventing curds**—You can prevent dishes with eggs and milk from curdling



When heated or exposed to acid, the bonds pop and the proteins unwind.



As unwound proteins bump into each other, the proteins bond together, forming curds.

by putting obstacles in the course of unwound proteins. Fat, sugar, and other substances will get in the way and slow down coagulation. That's why sauces made with heavy cream don't curdle, while those made with low-fat yogurt do. Heavy cream has a low protein content and a high fat content. When you heat cream in a sauce, the few proteins that are there might unwind, but they are immediately coated with fat. There's little danger that they'll join with other proteins to form curds.

But loading dishes with butter, oil, or sugar to prevent curdling defeats the purpose of using a lower-fat milk product. Take heart, because there is something you can add to keep milk from curdling that has little effect on calories—starch.

Starch granules swell with heat and can become very large. When you stir starch into a liquid and heat it, liquid seeps into starch's onion-like layers and the granules begin to puff. At 90°, some starch granules contain 200 times their weight of liquid, and near boiling they contain 3000 times their weight of liquid. The granules break open, the starch rushes out into the sauce, and the sauce thickens instantly.

Remember the *crème anglaise* that turns to scrambled eggs if it isn't heated

gently and stirred constantly? Well, this custard has a cousin, pastry cream (*crème pâtissière*), which contains the same ingredients: flavored milk, eggs, and sugar. But it also contains a little starch—cornstarch or flour. You simply stir this custard together, place it on a burner, and heat and stir until it thickens. No worry at all about scrambled eggs or milk curds. A little starch makes all the difference.

Is the starch actually bonding in some way to the unwound proteins to prevent their joining? Or are the swollen starch granules simply so big that

they physically prevent the proteins from getting together?

So far, I go with the explanation offered by Dr. Peter Barham, a polymer physicist from the University of Bristol, England. He asserts that as long as you have a starch that swells significantly at temperatures below the temperature at which the protein coagulates (different starches swell at different temperatures), the starch will be so large that it physically separates the denatured proteins and prevents them from joining.

Most starches available to the home cook (cornstarch, arrowroot, flour) will prevent curdling. You'll need to experiment with your particular sauce to arrive at the perfect amount of thickener. Usually ½ to 1 teaspoon cornstarch per cup of liquid will prevent curdling and thicken the sauce to the desired consistency. This will work with most low-fat dairy products in most sauces. Extremely acidic sauces will be a problem. Reduce the acidity or use a purée to thicken them instead.

—Shirley Corriher, a research biochemist by training, teaches cooking and food science courses around the country. She has written a book about the science of food and cooking that will be published by William Morrow this year. ♦

#### SCIENCE PROJECT

Here's an experiment to watch how starch prevents eggs and milk from curdling. Take three egg yolks and one cup of milk, whisk them together, and bring to a boil over medium-high heat, whisking constantly. Watch the mixture form curds. Now take three more egg yolks, whisk in 1½ tablespoons of flour and then one cup of milk. Bring the mixture to a boil over medium-high heat, whisking constantly, and watch what happens—it becomes thick and smooth.



*Penne d'Allessandria*

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### **Penne d'Allessandria**

6 red bell peppers, quartered, seeds and stems discarded	2 garlic cloves, coarsely chopped
6 Tbsp. Bertolli Extra Virgin Olive Oil	1 lb. Italian sausage, sliced (removed from casings)
Salt and freshly ground black pepper	1 lb. penne or other tubular pasta shape
1 lb. large white mushrooms, sliced	1/4 cup reserved pasta cooking liquid
1/2 cup packed Italian parsley leaves	Grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, to taste
1 Tbsp. fresh oregano leaves	
1 Tbsp. fresh thyme leaves, stripped from stems	

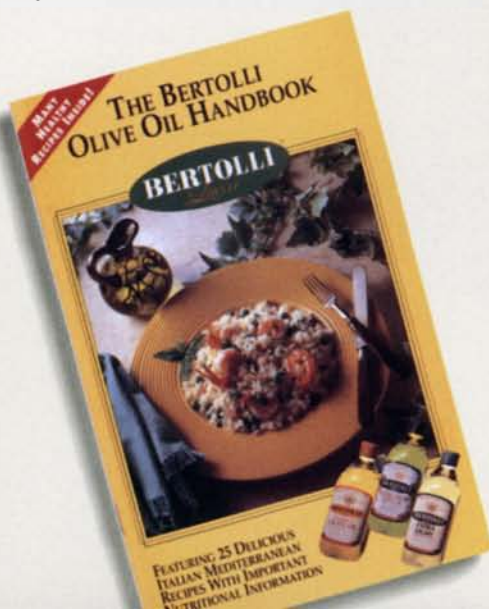
1. Heat oven to 450°F. Cut pepper quarters into 1/2" thick diagonal pieces. Place in 13x9" baking dish. Drizzle with 3 Tbsp. of olive oil; salt, pepper to taste. Bake until peppers are charred on edges and tender, stirring occasionally, 30-40 min. Remove from oven.

2. Finely chop parsley, oregano, thyme, garlic together; set aside. Heat 3 Tbsp. of oil in large non-stick skillet. Add mushrooms, cook, stirring, over medium high heat until mushrooms are tender and golden brown. Add chopped herb and garlic mixture; saute, stirring, 2 min. Sprinkle with salt, pepper, transfer to side dish. Wipe out skillet.

3. Place sausage into skillet, cook, stirring, over medium high heat, until sausage is browned. Transfer to strainer, drain. To baking dish with roasted peppers, add mushroom mixture and sausage. Cover with foil. Keep warm in oven, set at lowest temperature.

4. Boil large pot of water. Stir in penne, salt, to taste. Cook, stirring frequently, over high heat, until pasta is tender. Ladle out 1/4 cup pasta cooking liquid; reserve. Drain pasta.

5. In large deep platter combine pasta, red pepper, mushroom and sausage mixture. Stir to combine. Add pasta cooking liquid to moisten pasta. Sprinkle with cheese. Serves 4.



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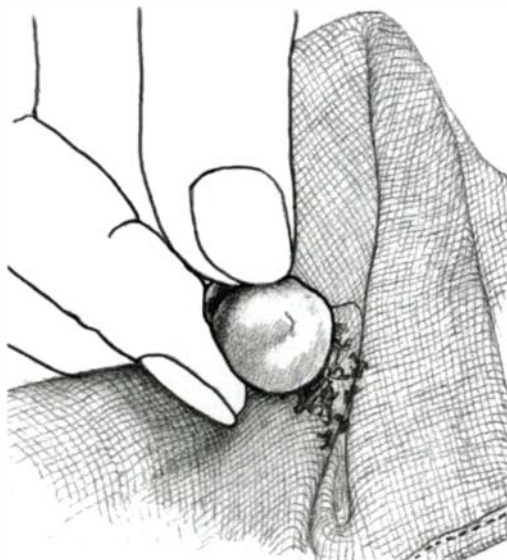




## TIPS

To share your shortcuts or tricks with fellow readers, write to **Tips**, *Fine Cooking*, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506. Enclose a sketch if you like. We pay \$25 to \$50 for tips we publish.

### Easy-to-Skin Nuts



Hazelnuts made me nuts until I learned how to get their skins off easily. Blanch the hazelnuts in boiling water with one teaspoon of baking soda for 30 to 45 seconds. Drain the nuts and dump them on a dishtowel. Rub the nuts with the towel and the skins will fall right off. Dry them completely with the towel, and then roast them in a 400°F oven for about eight minutes to bring out the best flavor.

—T. Skipwith Lewis, Marlborough, CT

### Peeling Butternut Squash

To peel the reluctant butternut squash before cutting it up for cooking, microwave it for a few minutes. The peel will be much easier to separate from the flesh.

—Betsy Schwartz, Glenville, CT

### Flakiest Pie Crust

To make the flakiest pie crust, use frozen, unsalted butter and a food processor. Cut the butter into one- to two-inch chunks and add them to the processor after mixing the flour and salt in it first. Process the mixture until the

butter is chopped into small pieces, and then add ice water. This method requires a bit more ice water than when hand-mixing with cold butter. Pulse a few times, and then gather the dough into a ball and roll it out.

For a nine-inch pie crust, I use two cups flour, one teaspoon salt,  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup butter, and about five tablespoons ice water.

—Brenda Eitelman, Northville, MI

### Salvaging Dry Cake

If you have overbaked a cake to dryness, you might be able to salvage it by imbibing it with a simple sugar syrup (see Basics). Cut off the sides and top of the cake and brush on the syrup with a pastry brush until it's well saturated; a dry cake can take a lot of syrup. The syrup will change the character of the cake, but it can be very tasty, especially if you flavor the syrup with a liqueur or brandy.

—Krista Stanley, *Once Upon a Cake*, Mt. Kisco, NY

### Keeping Delicate Sauces Warm

To keep a delicate sauce, such as a *beurre blanc* or a *béarnaise*, warm and at a stable temperature so that it doesn't break or curdle, pour it into a Thermos flask. It will keep beautifully up to two hours.

—Rhonda Abel, Charlotte, NC

### De-Gritting Clams

Before cooking clams, I soak them for half an hour in a mixing bowl with water and two or three tablespoons of cornmeal. The shellfish ingest the cornmeal and spit it out again, along with whatever dirt was inside the shells.

—June Cerrito, Wakefield, RI

### Buttering Pans

When baking, you need to butter your pans ahead of time so they're ready to use when your dough or batter is finished. But if you leave the pans sitting in a warm kitchen, the butter can melt and slide down the sides, leaving you with an unevenly buttered, and potentially sticky, pan. To prevent this problem, melt

the butter and brush the pan with a pastry brush, and then immediately put the pan in the freezer. This method allows you to get the pans ready ahead of time, and it keeps the butter from melting in the heat of a warm kitchen.

—Arline Slote-Davis, Hinsdale, MA

### Crushing Peppercorns



If you want crushed peppercorns for coating a piece of meat or fish or to use in a sauce, you shouldn't use your pepper grinder because the gauge is too fine and the pepper will be too powdery. I crush peppercorns on my wooden cutting board using the bottom of a heavy saucepan. I hold the handle in one hand and the rim in the other and then rock the pan bottom over the peppercorns until I've got the degree of "crush" that I want. I don't try to do more than a tablespoon of peppercorns at once, because they would roll all over the place.

—Kathleen West, Havre de Grace, MD

### Nonskid Cutting Board

A cutting board that skids around your counter while you're slicing or chopping is aggravating at best, unsafe at worst. It's a good idea to lay a slightly damp dishtowel underneath your cutting board before you work. The single layer of dishtowel makes the cutting board nonskid, and if your board is a tiny bit warped, the towel helps to level it. As an additional benefit, any juices that run off of your food are likely

(Continued on page 18)

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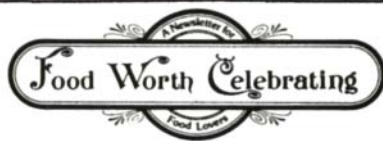


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to be absorbed by the towel, instead of dripping onto the counter.

—Morgan Gallagher, Cleveland, OH

## Easier Grating

Grating citrus zest on a box grater can be frustrating because so much of the zest gets stuck in the teeth or clings to the grater panel. A good way to avoid this is to stretch plastic film over the grater

panel. I usually use the produce department plastic bag that the fruit came in. Just hold it taut over the face of the grater and grate as normal.

When you're finished, pull the plastic from the grater and almost all of the zest will be on the plastic. Just shake or scrape it off. You might think that you'd get little bits of plastic in with the zest, but you don't.

—Deborah Orrill, Dallas, TX



## Frozen Meat for Sausage

I make sausage several times a month with the meat-grinder/sausage-horn attachment to my mixer. To keep the meat from turning to mush in the grinder, I've found it best to first cut the meat into sizable chunks and put them in the freezer until not quite frozen. This technique is especially important for chicken breast, which is such a soft meat.

—Phillip Zook, Carrboro, NC

## Saving Ginger

Rather than end up with moldy bits of leftover ginger in the crisper drawer of my refrigerator, I peel the ginger, put it whole into a jar, cover with vinegar, and store it in the fridge until I need a bit of it to grate or slice.

—Mary Schroeder, Seattle, WA

## Massaging Lemons

To get the most juice out of a citrus fruit, first give it a massage. Roll the fruit back and forth on the counter, pressing hard with the heel of your hand. This will soften the fruit and crush the juice cells within the membranes. It will be easier to squeeze because the juices have already begun to flow.

—Meg Perry, Akron, OH ♦

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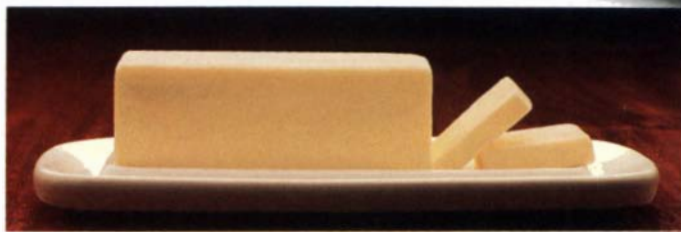
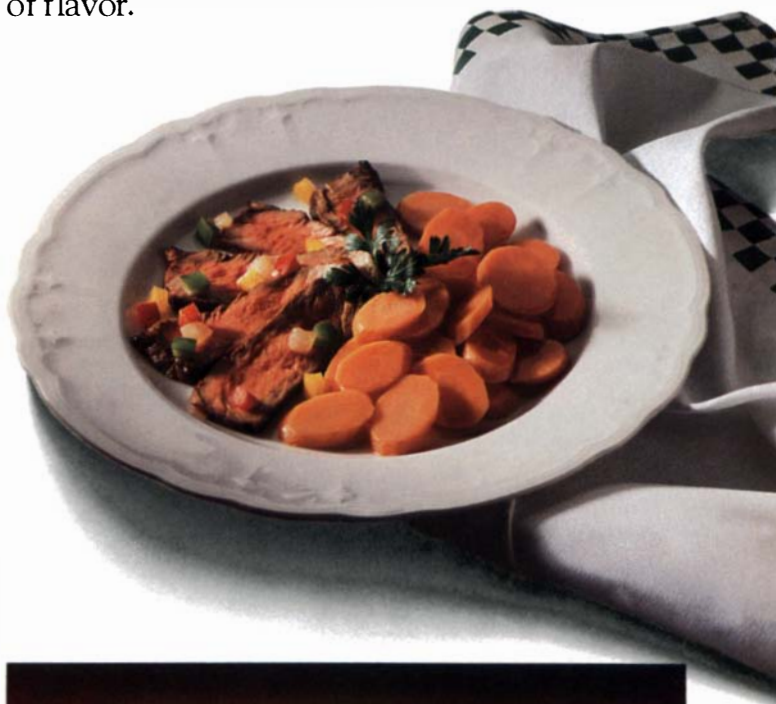
Chef David Burke, Park Avenue Cafe, NYC



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# South Indian Chicken Curry

Coconut milk and ten spices  
flavor its thick sauce

BY AMINNI RAMACHANDRAN

**T**he land where I was raised in the southwestern part of India is known as Kerala, the place of coconut trees. It is endowed with lush, tropical growth the year round—coconut trees along the coast and, at higher elevations, an abundance of herbs and spices. It's no wonder that in this region, curries—highly spiced dishes often flavored with coconut milk and served with rice—are an important part of every dinner. The meals, always cooked fresh, are quite time-consuming to prepare. Chickens are purchased live and butchered at home; fresh coconuts are cracked open, their meat shredded, and milk pressed from the meat; and right before the cooking begins, a special mix of spices for each dish is ground by hand in a mortar and pestle.

My taste for South Indian curries hasn't changed in the 22 years that I've lived in the United States, but my method for preparing them has become much quicker. By keeping dried spices on hand and grinding them myself, using packaged, shredded coconut to make the coconut milk, and buying chicken and vegetables at the supermarket, I can prepare a rich, flavorful chicken curry in just over an hour. And it's almost as good as the curry I remember from Kerala.

## SPICING THE CURRY

Indian cooks stock a number of spices that we use in varying amounts and proportions depending on

*Delicious chicken curry in just over an hour can be put together from off-the-shelf ingredients from your local supermarket. Dried spices and milk made from grated coconut give it a distinctive, South Indian flavor.*

what's in the dish and on what other dishes we're serving in the meal. Most of the spices are common in American cooking, while some are more specific to Indian and Asian cooking.

**Assembling the spices.** In my chicken curry, I like to use ten spices (see photo at right). Three of them—fennel, cumin, and coriander—are the dried seeds of plants in the parsley family. I also use the green leaves and stems of coriander, which in its fresh form is often called cilantro in the United States. Black mustard seeds, native to India, resemble poppy seeds and are used whole. Strips of cinnamon bark, cardamom pods, and dried cloves—the unopened flower buds of

the clove tree—give the dish an almost sweet taste. Black peppercorns and dried chile peppers contribute heat. Finally turmeric, the root of a plant similar to ginger, supplies a bright yellow-orange, saffronlike color.

All of these spices are commonly available in supermarkets, except the

black mustard seeds, which are sold in Indian markets and in many natural-foods stores. Since ground spices quickly lose their flavor, it's best to buy the spices whole and grind them yourself. The two exceptions are turmeric and cayenne chile, which are usually sold already ground.

There's no right or wrong way to spice curries. Every cook has her own combinations of spices that she and her family like in different dishes. In fact, an enjoyable part of Indian cooking is playing with the spices and fine-tuning the mix to come up with something that suits your personal taste. I like my curry quite spicy, and so I use about a quarter cup of curry spice mix in a batch of chicken curry. If you're

*Grind your own spices for deeper flavor and richer aroma. Spices rapidly lose their flavor once they're ground, so to enhance the flavor of your curry, roast whole spices briefly on the stove and grind them in a spice or coffee grinder right before adding them to the curry.*







**Make coconut milk quickly with shredded, unsweetened coconut.**  
1. Soak 1 cup coconut in 1 cup boiling water for 10 to 15 minutes.



2. Liquefy the mixture in a blender, and strain through a piece of cheesecloth.



3. Squeeze all the liquid, or "milk," out of the coconut meat.

not sure about your spice tolerance, you may want to use only two tablespoons the first time you make it.

If you don't have the individual spices on hand, you can use a prepackaged mix. The curry powder that's sold in supermarkets is simply a mixture of spices commonly used in Indian cooking. Indian markets carry both ground and unground spice mixes, called *masalas*, specifically matched to certain foods, such as chicken, fish, or vegetables. Once you've found a mix that you particularly like, your dishes will taste the same every time you use it.

**Roasting and grinding.** To bring out the full flavor of the spices, roast them briefly before grinding them. Leave out the black mustard seeds, which will be used whole in the curry. Put a frying pan over medium heat, and when it's hot, add about a teaspoon of oil. Once the oil is also hot, put the unground spices in the pan and, stirring frequently, roast them until they begin to brown and release their spicy aroma. The small amount of oil develops the color and flavor of the spices, but isn't essential. If you're using ground spices, you can roast them very briefly, about 15 seconds, in a dry frying pan over low heat. They burn quickly, so be ready to remove them from the pan.

Next, grind the spices fine. I use a small coffee grinder, which keeps the spices in constant motion while the whirling blade grinds them. A blender or food processor won't work because the blades are too high to cut the small spices. You can also grind them, of course, in a mortar and pestle.

### MAKING COCONUT MILK

Coconut milk rounds out the

taste of curries, and softens the harshness of the spices. Often mistaken for the clear liquid inside a fresh coconut, coconut milk is actually a white liquid made from grated coconut meat. Whole coconuts take a bit of work to crack, peel, and grate, and in curries that have so many spices and ingredients, the fresh coconut flavor isn't essential. While canned coconut milk can be used, I prefer not to cook with it because it is more expensive and is liable to have a "tinny" flavor.

I find that the best compromise between flavor and convenience is to make the milk from dried, shredded coconut. I keep enough shredded, unsweetened coconut on hand so that I can make coconut milk whenever I need it. Indian markets carry very finely shredded coconut, but the unsweetened grated coconut found in grocery stores and natural-foods markets works well too. Make sure you don't buy sweetened coconut, which is too sweet to use in curries.

Making coconut milk is a three-step process, usually done twice to get all the flavor out of the coconut. First soak the coconut in an equal amount of boiling water—in this case, 1 cup of coconut and 1 cup of

water (see photo 1 at left). Let the mixture sit for 10 to 15 minutes, then put it in a blender or food processor and pulverize for 1 minute. Line a bowl with cheesecloth and pour in the wet paste, as shown in photo 2. Gather the edges of the cheesecloth and squeeze out all the liquid in the coconut, as shown in photo 3. This will give you a rich, creamy, thick milk that you add to the chicken toward the end of its cooking time. The pulp that's left behind in the cheesecloth goes through the same procedure again—soaking in a cup of boiling water, chopping, and straining into another bowl. This second batch is much thinner, but when preparing the curry, it's the one you add first.

It takes about half an hour to make the coconut milk, but you can use the time that the coconut is soaking to chop the vegetables and the chicken. You can also make coconut milk in advance and freeze it.

### ASSEMBLING THE VEGETABLES AND CHICKEN

Curries are variable dishes. Onion, garlic, and ginger are standard flavorings, but a variety of vegetables can be used as main ingredients. My favorites with chicken are green peppers and potatoes. The potatoes nicely absorb the coconut curry sauce, while the peppers taste sweet and meaty. Experiment with your own favorite vegetables. Squash, carrots, cauliflower, eggplant, and spinach are a few of the vegetables that taste good with chicken.

For this recipe, begin by peeling and mincing both the garlic and the ginger. Then peel the onion and cut it lengthwise into thin strips. Peel the potatoes, cut them into ½-inch cubes, and soak them in

cold water until you're ready to use them. Next, cut the green peppers in half and remove the seeds and veins. Slice the peppers lengthwise into ½-inch-wide strips, and then chop those strips into two or three pieces each. Finally, wash the fresh coriander, pull off the leaves, and set them aside. Chop the stems into a couple of pieces each.

While you can of course make chicken curry with an entire chicken cut into small pieces, I frequently use just the thighs. Chicken thighs cook evenly, and their meat is moist and tender, and because they're small, the curry flavor deeply penetrates them. I remove the skin from the thighs before I cook them to keep the fat out of the curry and to make the pieces more attractive to serve.

### COOKING THE CURRY

Once you've roasted and ground the spices, made the coconut milk, chopped the vegetables, and skinned the chicken, you're ready to cook the curry.

In a large pot, heat 1 tablespoon oil over medium heat until it is very hot. Add ½ teaspoon black mustard seeds, and let them sizzle for about a minute. Add

### COCONUT MILK

Makes 1 cup thick milk and 1 cup thin milk.

1 cup shredded, unsweetened coconut  
2 cups boiling water



*To soften the flavor of the spices, and to make a creamy sauce, the author simmers the chicken for her curry in coconut milk.*

the garlic, ginger, sliced onion, and coriander stems, and cook them for 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the ground spices and continue cooking for 6 to 8 minutes until the onions are very soft, stirring often so that the onions cook evenly. Then add the green peppers and cook until they're soft also, about 4 minutes.

When the onions and peppers are soft and have absorbed the spices, start adding the chicken, a little at a time. Stir the pieces until they're coated with the spices, and then add some more chicken. When all the chicken has been stirred in, pour the second, thinner batch of coconut milk over the chicken, add the salt and the drained potatoes, reduce the heat to medium low, cover, and simmer for 40 minutes.

When the chicken is cooked and the potatoes are tender, remove the cover and bring the liquid to a boil. Let the liquid boil for 3 to 5 minutes, until the sauce is thick. Then add the first batch of coconut milk and the coriander leaves. Bring the liquid back to a simmer, season with salt, and you're ready to serve.

## SERVING

Rice is an indispensable part of a South Indian meal, and it's a perfect starch to serve with chicken curry. Put on a pot of rice before you start cooking the onions so that the rice has time to cook and sit before the chicken is ready. Serve thin, round chapati breads to

scoop up the sauce. Finally, a dab of chutney, yogurt raita, or a hot pickle adds another flavor to the plate.

## VARIATIONS

I love the taste of coconut—it has been a part of my diet since I was a baby. But even in the land of coconut trees, we've discovered

that the tropical oil in coconut makes it unwise to eat every day. I frequently make this same curry, but instead of using coconut milk, I use yogurt to make the curry creamy and tangy. To do this, use water in place of the thin cup of coconut milk and yogurt in place of the the thick cup. Beat the yogurt before adding it and then mix it thoroughly with the chicken and onions to prevent it from curdling.

Many Indians are vegetarians and enjoy curries made with two or three vegetables. A nice combination is cauliflower, potatoes, and peas. Stir large florets of cauliflower into the spiced onions, and then add the coconut milk and potatoes. Add the peas when the potatoes are almost tender because peas cook very quickly.

## CHICKEN CURRY

*Serves six.*

- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1-inch piece of ginger, minced
- 3 onions, sliced thin
- 3 potatoes, diced in 1/2-inch cubes
- 2 green peppers
- 3 stems fresh coriander (cilantro), plus 1/4 cup loosely packed leaves
- 2 pounds chicken thighs, skinned
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1/2 teaspoon black mustard seeds
- 2 to 3 tablespoons Curry Spice Mix (p. 21), or curry powder
- 2 cups coconut milk, 1 cup thick, 1 cup thin (p. 22)
- 1 teaspoon salt

*For Aminni Ramachandran, Indian ingredients are easier to come by than they were when she first moved to Connecticut 22 years ago. Still, she brings back her favorite spice mix every time she visits her home in Trivandrum, on the southern tip of India. ♦*



# Marinating Vegetables Mediterranean Style

Building up layers of flavor

BY JEANNE QUAN

**T**he countries of the Mediterranean have long been known for simple, home-style cooking. The best of these dishes are deeply flavored and make abundant use of fresh vegetables. Mediterranean cooks are also known for marinating vegetables, and for good reason. Marinating enables the cook to work in an easy and convenient way, varying vegetable types and amounts according to what's available. Marinating results in food with layers and layers of flavors, yet it allows each of the individual ingredients to have its voice. Marinated vegetable dishes also usually improve over time, a real boon to me because I'm inclined to make large quantities, a result of my years as a caterer.

I work with a company that imports high-quality foods and wines from Greece. At home, I stock a pantry of good oils and vinegars, brine-cured olives and capers, along with favorite condiments like olive paste, herbs packed in olive oil, and preserved lemons. These form the base and flavoring of many marinades. With these provisions on hand and armed with the most basic of cooking skills, it's possible to prepare vegetable dishes that are both nutritious and satisfyingly flavorful.

## WHY MARINATE?

There are several benefits to marinating vegetables. First and foremost, a marinade *infuses* its host with flavor. There is time for separate elements to mellow and balance one another. Rather than having any one ingredient dominate, sharp flavors meld with shy. The ideal in marinating is to honor and emphasize the individual character of each ingredient while developing undertones as a result of the blending.

*Marinated vegetables offer several advantages. Bread salad, shown with the author at right, combines vegetables and stale bread in a vinaigrette, and illustrates many of Quan's ideas—the layering of many flavors, using seasonal produce, good nutrition, and advance preparation.*



Marinating is an excellent way of tying “this to that,” making the most of what I have on hand and thus avoiding waste. It isn’t an accident that the healthiest diets are also frugal—using every bit of what is fresh, and then marinating to tenderize, flavor, or preserve food for lean times.

Convenience is a third benefit. Because most preparation is done well in advance, I can dictate the time schedule. Marinated foods allow me to serve a number of small dishes at room temperature,



**Mediterranean bounty at hand.** Jars of preserved lemons flank one of pickled vegetables in Jeanne Quan’s kitchen. These deeply flavorful concoctions are ready to add to recipes or to eat as is. (Recipes on p. 27.)

the way to truly appreciate their deepened flavors. These marinated dishes are central to Mediterranean dining—and are included in *antipasto* in Italy, *meze* in Greece, and *tapas* in Spain.

#### PREPARING VEGETABLES FOR MARINATING

Some vegetables benefit from advance preparation, especially those that have a raw, green, or somewhat bitter taste, like green pepper, asparagus, wild greens, and broccoli; or dense ones like beets, potatoes, and artichokes. Zucchini and eggplant lie somewhere between dense and porous. Most of the time I precook them.

Blanching green vegetables brightens their colors, makes them tender, and helps them lose their raw taste. Dense vegetables can be boiled, roasted, or grilled. Roasting brings out natural sugars and makes vegetables tender. Try roasted beets, carrots, parsnips, and onions—you may be surprised at the amount of natural sweetness they contain. One of my favorite salads is freshly roasted beets marinated in orange juice, sweet vinegar, garlic, and herbs.

Grilling also brings out sweetness and adds a smoky flavor. Piquant and smoky *melitzanasalata* (eggplant salad) is made of grilled eggplant that has been chopped and seasoned with herbs and vinegar. No matter how I cook them, I like to marinate dense vegetables while they’re still warm. They seem to accept the marinade in a greedy fashion.

I marinate tender or juicy vegetables, such as tomatoes and cucumbers, raw and usually at room temperatures so as not to spoil their texture. For these vegetables, I find myself choosing tender herbs like fresh dill, basil, and chervil. Nothing matches their fresh-cut fragrance when added to the dish at the last minute.

I don’t let tender vegetables linger too long in a marinade. If they do, water is extracted from them, which dilutes the marinade. Greens, even sturdy wild ones, should not sit too long either. When preparing dandelion, purslane, kale, and chard, I blanch them until tender but still bright green and quickly dress them with a good squeeze of lemon, a touch of herbs, and a sprinkling of sheep’s milk feta cheese. This dish is everything I crave: tart, slightly bitter, salty, and herbaceous.

#### MARINATING INGREDIENTS

Lemons, vinegar, olive oil, and sea salt are age-old preserving agents, helping to create conditions that inhibit the growth of bacteria. Acidic ingredients like lemon and vinegar lower the pH, salt extracts water, and olive oil seals out air. Because marinades permeate what sits in them, the flavor and quality of every ingredient is very important. It pays to be choosy when selecting them.

**Fresh lemons** not only provide acidity but are also aromatic. I love to use them in marinades. In addition to their fresh juice, lemons yield highly flavorful oil from the skin. I often add thin strips of zest to marinades as a flavor reinforcement and a colorful accent. Whenever possible I use Meyer lemons for their soft, sweet taste. When buying lemons I look not for the cosmetically perfect but for those that feel heavy for their size and that yield ever so slightly to the touch. These have the most juice. Before using a lemon, I roll it back and forth under my hand on the countertop with moderate downward pressure. This massage helps the lemon yield every drop.

**Preserved lemons**, made by soaking salted lemons in olive oil, are a wonderfully mellow condiment for Mediterranean recipes (see recipe, p. 27). They’re easy to prepare and cost effective, because you eat the whole lemon, not just its juice, and a little bit goes a long way. The oil also takes on a heavenly flavor that’s appropriate for many uses.

**Good vinegar** gives both an aroma and an edge to all preparations. I stock several kinds: aged red-



wine, *glykadi* (an aged sweet Greek vinegar similar to balsamic), rice, and sherry vinegars. Vinegar is only as good and as delicious as the wine from which it's made. A high-quality vinegar will not smell or taste harsh. You can sip it from a spoon without making a face.

While most cooks are familiar with lemon, lime, or vinegar as acid ingredients, consider their more gentle but equally interesting cousins like bittersweet Seville oranges, blood oranges, even pomegranate juice and well-seasoned yogurt. They're all excellent vehicles for seasonings that permeate and perfume.

**Extra-virgin olive oil** is expensive but essential in marinades. Extra-virgin oil comes from the first cold pressing of the olives, and it has much more flavor than later pressings. For that reason, I can use less of it.

**Pure salt** is an important ingredient in marinades. Choose sea salt or kosher salt, both of which are one-hundred-percent pure, with no added elements or impurities.

### ARTICHOKES WITH FENNEL BULB AND PRESERVED LEMONS

This is one of my favorite recipes—I consider it Mediterranean soul food. It's an adaptation of a recipe my employer and friend, Sotiris Kitrilakis, developed. For best flavor, prepare one day in advance. *Serves six.*

2 lemons, halved  
6 medium artichokes  
1 yellow onion, sliced thin  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  cup lemon-infused oil (preferably the packing oil from preserved lemons, but extra-virgin olive oil is a fine substitute)  
8 oz. fresh fennel (feathery tops included), sliced thin  
8 Tbs. chopped fresh dill (6 for cooking, 2 for garnish)  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. dried thyme  
4 carrots, chopped medium coarse  
Salt and pepper  
1 cup water  
4 to 6 Tbs. chopped preserved lemons (see recipe on opposite page)  
4 to 6 Tbs. chopped flat-leaf parsley

Squeeze the juice of one lemon into a large bowl of cold water. Use the other to rub the artichokes as you trim them to prevent discoloration. Cut off all but 1 in. of the artichoke stem. Starting from the base, bend each leaf back and snap off. Trim top to 1 in. Use a teaspoon to remove the choke. Trim and shape the base with a knife until no dark areas remain. Drop the artichoke into the prepared water. Repeat with the remaining artichokes.

In a heavy Dutch oven over medium heat, cook the onion in  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup oil until light brown, stirring frequently. Add the remaining oil, fennel, dill, thyme, and carrots. Season with salt and pepper, reduce heat to medium low and cook 3 min., stirring frequently. Add the artichokes (stem end up) and the water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, cover, and simmer gently until the artichoke stems are tender, about 30 min. Cool and refrigerate.

To serve, spread the vegetables out on a platter with the artichokes on top, stem end up. Garnish with preserved lemon, parsley, and dill.



Artichokes, fennel, and carrots make up one of the author's favorite dishes (see the recipe at left). She calls it "Mediterranean soul food."

**Bread salad** is versatile, accepting many different kinds of vegetables. The author's version includes stale bread, ripe tomatoes, onion, cucumber, capers, olives, and feta cheese. (Recipe at right.)





*Preserved lemons are a delicious condiment. Chop them up and strew them over feta cheese or salads, serve them alongside seafood, or stuff them into the cavity of a chicken before roasting.*



### **BREAD SALAD FROM CRETE**

This salad illustrates many ideas I've talked about: the layering of flavors, using the best of what's in season, making it go a long way, and finally, good nutrition. Bread salad stands as a meal on its own or accompanies grilled or roasted poultry, seafood, and meat. Feel free to change the ratios of the vegetables, but I find the cool crunch of cucumbers and the sweetness of tomatoes or roasted peppers essential. *Serves four.*

**4 cups good-quality, densely textured, whole-wheat or mixed-grain bread, cut into 1-in. cubes**  
 **$\frac{3}{4}$  cup extra-virgin olive oil**  
 **$\frac{1}{4}$  cup red-wine vinegar or freshly squeezed lemon juice**  
**1 Tbs. dried Greek oregano**  
**3 cups ripe tomatoes (in winter substitute roasted red peppers), seeded and cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. pieces**  
**2 cups cucumber, seeded and cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. pieces**  
**3 Tbs. capers**  
 **$\frac{1}{2}$  cup brine-cured olives, pitted and chopped**  
 **$\frac{1}{2}$  cup red onion, chopped fine**  
**2 Tbs. fresh mint, cut into thin strips**  
**2 Tbs. fresh basil, cut into thin strips**  
**4 Tbs. flat-leaf parsley, chopped**  
**2 tsp. or more black pepper**  
**8 oz. sheep's milk feta cheese (optional)**

Allow the bread to dry several hours or overnight. Combine the oil, vinegar, and oregano and set aside.

Approximately 30 min. before serving, combine all the ingredients in a large bowl and toss well. Garnish with additional basil or mint leaves and crumbled feta if you like. The salad will get soggy after a time, but quite honestly, I like it even better that way.

### **GIARDINERA**

*(Marinated and preserved garden vegetables)*

After some experimentation, I came up with this updated version of the traditional Italian pickled vegetables. It's colorful, spicy, easy, and it can be made up in small batches. Giardinera is perfect as an hors d'oeuvre with ales and stouts. You can vary the selection and proportions of vegetables and adjust the amount to the size of the container you're filling. *Makes about 3 quarts.*

**1 small head cauliflower**  
**2 medium red peppers**  
**1 medium yellow pepper**  
**2 ribs celery**  
**3 small pickling cucumbers**  
**1 lb. carrots (baby carrots are especially nice)**  
**2 to 3 small Japanese eggplant**  
**3 cups white-wine or rice vinegar**  
 **$2\frac{1}{2}$  cups water**  
**4 Tbs. sea salt or kosher salt**  
**4 cloves garlic**  
**2 to 3 small dried chili pods**  
**12 peppercorns**  
**8 large sprigs fresh dill**  
**Olive oil to top off**

Thoroughly clean and trim the vegetables, removing all blemishes, seeds, ribs from inside the peppers, and tough cauliflower stems. Cut the vegetables to uniform sizes; I prefer them in 2-in. pieces. (Baby carrots can be left whole.) Blanch the eggplant for 1 min. in boiling salted water. Pack all vegetables snugly into a clean glass jar with a clamp lid.

In a glass or ceramic bowl, mix the vinegar, water, salt, and seasonings. Pour the mixture over the vegetables to completely submerge them. Make more pickling liquid if necessary. Top off with a  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. layer of olive oil. Store in a cool pantry for two weeks before eating.

### **PRESERVED LEMONS**

Preserved lemons were a revelation to me—they're versatile, delicious, and easy to prepare. Experiment with different combinations. For Mediterranean cooking, I prepare lemons with extra-virgin olive oil, oregano, bay leaves, and peppercorns. For Indian recipes, I blend limes and key limes with canola oil, paprika, cayenne, and black mustard seed. *Makes about 3 quarts.*

**12 medium to large lemons, unsprayed, if possible**  
**2 Tbs. (approximately) sea salt or kosher salt**  
**Herbs and spices of your choice—dried chili pods, oregano, bay leaves, peppercorns**  
**3 to 4 cups (approximately) extra-virgin olive oil, canola oil, or a combination**

Wash the lemons thoroughly. Slice each into eight wedges or crosswise into  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. sections. Arrange the lemons in a single layer on a tray or dish, sprinkle with salt, cover with plastic wrap, and repeat until all the lemons are laid out and salted. Let stand 24 hours. (Refrigerate in hot climates.)

Layer the lemons into a glass clamp-lid jar with herbs and spices. Discard the salty juice that has seeped from them. Cover with oil, submerging the fruit by at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. Give the jar a gentle rap to dislodge any air bubbles lurking among the lemons. Keep the jar on the counter or in a cool pantry. After two weeks, the lemons should be soft-textured, with a mellow-tart flavor. Once you've dipped into them, refrigerate or store in a cool pantry. Always maintain a  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. layer of oil on top.

Jeanne Quan has been a San Francisco Bay Area retailer, caterer, and cooking teacher for more than seventeen years. Her special focus is on Mediterranean foods and wines. As Director of Market Development for Peloponnese, a Greek food importing company, she talks to food producers, retailers, and customers throughout the United States and Europe. ♦



# A Spring Menu for Lamb

High-quality ingredients and simple cooking techniques  
set you free to enjoy your guests

BY BRUCE LEFAVOUR

*Search out the best ingredients. Professional chefs know that using top-notch ingredients can do more to improve the final dish than reading a host of cookbooks. Shown at right are the makings for Lamb Loin with Spring Vegetables. The recipe appears on p. 31.*



Photos: Ruth Lively

**C**hefs have anemic social lives. That's because we're always in the kitchen preparing the food while everyone else is having a good time. So, during the 23 years that I was a professional chef, when I cooked at home for my guests, the meals were simpler than those I cooked in the restaurant, the courses fewer, the sauces and garnishes less elaborate. I feel the same way today. I don't want to spend any more time than necessary at the stove because I want to talk and interact with the people my wife and I have invited into our home.

Therefore, my menu here features those items that are in season and hence at their best: asparagus, lamb, and strawberries. By choosing ingredients that are at their peak of flavor, I can prepare them simply, letting their own good taste make the meal memorable.

Choosing the best possible asparagus, lamb, and strawberries is all-important. A big factor in becoming a successful chef is to establish solid relationships with the top growers, producers, and purveyors in the area: you become aggressive and demanding, always seeking the best varieties of vegetables, fresher fish, free-range eggs, tender organic meat. The quality, the good taste of *every* ingredient used in the kitchen is important.

The home cook, without an established network of suppliers, has a harder time, but there are some things you can do no matter where you live. Establish personal relationships with area farmers. A good place to do this is at farmers' markets or roadside stands run by growers. If you're lucky enough to have a small grocery store nearby with an active butcher department, get to know the butcher. Tell him what

you want. Ask for high-quality cuts and don't be too shy to comment when you're disappointed or delighted. Similarly, ask the produce manager to buy from local growers. Suggest varieties you know to be good. This tactic may even work in a supermarket. Cajole. Flatter. Plead. All this may seem like a lot of trouble to go to for the raw ingredients of a meal, but if you're serious about your cooking, it's well worth the effort. Developing sources for fresh, high-quality ingredients will do more to improve your cooking than reading dozens of cookbooks.

## THE MENU

So, with all this in mind, let's consider the specifics of our spring meal.

**Asparagus, the quintessential spring vegetable**, is a perfect first course. It tastes so good that it needs only steaming and the simplest accompaniment to become extra special. The best and most delicious asparagus is the freshest, for as soon as the stalk is cut, natural processes start to convert its sugars into strings of fiber. (Refrigerating the spears with the cut end kept damp slows but doesn't stop this degeneration.) Regardless of their thickness, fresh asparagus spears have firm stalks that are bright green, waxy-looking, and not wrinkled from dehydration. The cut ends should appear white and moist, showing little or no gray from prolonged exposure to the air. The tips should be tightly closed and compact.

I like the taste of citrus with asparagus. Freshly squeezed orange juice, reduced on the stove, is the basis for a good but simple sauce (as shown in the photo on p. 30). Here in California, blood oranges are available in spring, and their sweet, full flavor







**Let the flavor shine through.** Steamed Asparagus with Orange Sauce is a simple, delicious, and spectacularly beautiful first course. The sauce, easily made from freshly squeezed orange juice, reduced to half its volume and lightly seasoned, lets the natural flavor of the asparagus speak for itself.

and red color make them perfect for this treatment; however, any good, sweet orange variety, such as navel or Valencia, or even a tangelo will do.

**Lamb is our main course.** For many people, the leg is the traditional cut to serve. Like many chefs, I prefer to cook leg of lamb for a short time at very high heat to avoid drying out the meat. But I don't use this method at home because the smoke produced during the 500°F roasting process rolls out of the oven like one of our local fogs and overwhelms my house's weak ventilation system. Also, the lamb odor lingers in the house for days, clinging to furniture, walls, even bedding.

Therefore, the cut I prefer to prepare at home is the boned and defatted loin rack. The meat can be quickly sautéed, with minimal smoke and fuss, and then sliced for the plate. You probably won't see a lamb loin at the meat market; this is the part that is typically cut into chops. You'll need to request whole lamb loins from the butcher. You can either ask the butcher to bone and trim the loins for you, or do this yourself at home. (For a step-by-step explanation, see p. 32.)

Before my guests arrive, I simmer the bones and meat scraps to make a stock with which, at the last minute, I deglaze the frying pan. The resulting liquid, with the addition of a bit of butter, becomes the sauce. To accompany the lamb, I steam several different spring vegetables, say, fava beans, small carrots and turnips, peas, string beans, new potatoes, and baby crookneck squash (see photo at right).

Following the main course, I serve a lightly dressed salad. The acidity of a vinegar dressing overlaying the sharp taste of a mix of rocket (also called

arugula), corn salad (mâche), red mustard, mizuna, and leaf lettuces is pleasing after the richness of the lamb. I also set out a plate with one or two cheeses along with a fresh supply of crusty bread. This gives my guests something delicious to nibble while they drink the last of their wine.

**The dessert is strawberries,** as sweet and full of flavor as I can find. Finding really good berries can be a problem: appearances are deceiving. Those big red globes, shiny and overflowing the basket, can taste flat and bland as if they'd been injected with water. Unfortunately, most strawberry growers consider long shelf life, color, and large size more important than flavor. As a rule, I look for small berries. Often they've been on the plant as long as the big guys, but they've spent that time building flavor instead of taking on water. Sniff the berries. Flavorful ones have a powerful strawberry aroma. Any doubts can be dispelled by tasting a berry, something the grower or produce manager should always be willing to let the customer do. If you're lucky enough to find just-picked berries, don't refrigerate them when you get home. Like tomatoes, strawberries lose sweetness when chilled.

Once you have good berries in hand, keep the service as simple as possible. I like plain strawberries served with confectioners' sugar and a bowl of *crème fraîche*. (Lacking *crème fraîche*, unsweetened whipped cream will do.) I serve the berries on a platter so that the guests can serve themselves, dipping the berries in sugar and *crème fraîche* as they like. Sometimes I make flat, individual tart crusts from sugar-cookie dough and serve them with sugared berries and *crème fraîche*.

So the menu is set: asparagus with orange sauce, sautéed lamb loin with spring vegetables, salad, cheese, and strawberries. Because all but the final cooking for each dish can be done before your company arrives, you should be able to spend most of the evening with your guests.

### ASPARAGUS WITH ORANGE SAUCE

Freshly squeezed orange juice is an absolute must for this recipe; don't be tempted to substitute frozen concentrate. Use white pepper here if you can, to avoid black specks in the sauce. I also prefer the taste of white pepper. Serves six.

**3 lb. asparagus spears**  
**1 Tbs. unsalted butter**  
**Salt and freshly ground white pepper**

#### THE SAUCE:

**Zest of 1 orange**  
**Zest of 1 lemon**  
**3 cups freshly squeezed orange juice (sweet blood orange if available)**  
**2 tsp. French champagne vinegar or other highest-quality, mild white-wine vinegar**  
**¼ cup (approximately) lemon juice**  
**Salt and freshly ground white pepper**





**Before your guests arrive**—Immerse the asparagus briefly in cold water, stirring and rolling the stalks to remove any sand lodged in the tips. Snap off the tough bottoms, peel the spears, and then store them, wrapped in a damp towel, in the refrigerator. Set up the steamer.

With a vegetable peeler, remove the zests from the orange and the lemon in strips. Slice the strips lengthwise into thin needles, blanch for 1 min. in boiling water and then drain, dry, and roll in plastic wrap. Over low heat, reduce the orange juice by half in a heavy, large pan. Be careful because it boils over easily. Remove from the heat, add the vinegar, and taste. The juice will still be quite sweet. Add the lemon juice bit by bit until a pleasant balance is reached between sour and sweet. Salt and pepper the sauce to taste and reserve.

**Just before serving**—Put the sauce over a low flame to reheat but not boil. Steam the asparagus just until tender. The exact timing depends on the size of the spears. After 2 or 3 min. (less if the spears are very small, more if they're large), cut a slice off the base of a stalk and taste. If it's firm but not crunchy at the center, the upper part of the stalk is probably perfectly done. Eat a whole stalk to make sure. Remember that the asparagus will continue to cook from its own heat even after it's on the plate. When done, roll the asparagus quickly in the butter. Salt and pepper lightly. Spoon the sauce onto hot individual dishes or a platter. Arrange the asparagus on the sauce and sprinkle with the slivers of zest.

### LAMB LOIN AND SPRING VEGETABLES

When buying the lamb, be sure to specify lamb loin on the bone. Whether your butcher bones the lamb or you do, save the bones and meat scraps to make the lamb stock (see the recipe on p. 33). The sauce for the lamb is light and brothy, just the ticket for springtime. To drink with the lamb, I would pour a red wine, perhaps a young merlot with lots of fruit and mild tannins. Serves six.

#### THE LAMB:

3 lamb racks from the loin  
2 Tbs. olive oil  
Salt and freshly ground pepper

#### THE VEGETABLES:

About a cupful of each of at least five spring vegetables, selected for a variety of colors: small new potatoes, fava beans, small carrots and turnips, sugar snap peas, English peas, tiny crookneck squash, young golden beets, little creamer onions, baby leeks, French string beans (haricots verts), whole immature garlic bulbs, small zucchini.

Extra-virgin olive oil

Salt and freshly ground white pepper

#### THE SAUCE:

2 cups lamb stock (see p. 33)  
3 shallots, peeled and chopped fine  
2 to 3 Tbs. unsalted butter  
½ cup chopped fresh herbs—half tarragon, the rest parsley and chives

*Lamb without the fuss and smoke.*

*The loin, boned and trimmed of fat, is easily and quickly sautéed at the last minute. Stock from the bones and trimmings makes a flavorful sauce for tender steamed vegetables—springtime on a dinner plate.*



## Boning a lamb loin

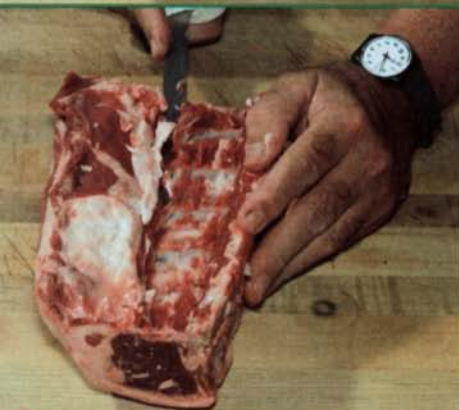
It isn't difficult to bone a lamb loin. One advantage to doing it yourself is that you can be certain of getting every bit of scrap and bone to add to the stock. When boning the lamb, avoid gouging the meat, and cut as close to the bone as you can. To do this, your knife should be very sharp, flexible, and pointed.



**1** Place the loin, fat side down, on the cutting board. To avoid slicing into the meat, keep the sharp edge of your knife tilted slightly toward the bone throughout the boning process. Start by cutting away the smaller filet.



**2** The bone of the loin is T-shaped. Complete the freeing of the filet by cutting down the leg of the T.



**3** Now turn the piece of lamb around. To free the loin, start by working around the bottom of the T. Feel with your fingers to find where the bones start. Cut back up the other side of the leg of the T.



**4** Right where the bone turns at the top of the T, there's a half-inch bump which you must carefully cut around. Do not hurry. Feel your way with your finger and the knife.

**5** After you've negotiated your way around the bump, cut the loin completely from the bone.



**6** To separate the loin from the shell of fat that clings to it, work carefully, making small cuts with the tip of your knife between the meat and the fat.



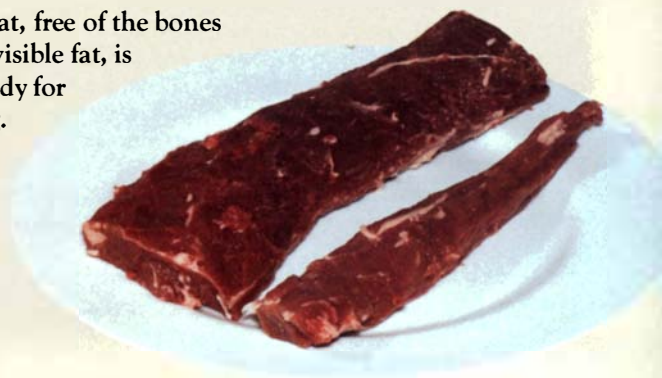
**7** Roll the loin toward you as you free it from its fat. When this process is complete, only a thin layer of very tough "silver skin" will remain on the meat.



**8** Remove the silver skin on both the filet and the loin by running your knife between the meat and the skin. Also trim away any remaining bits of fat.



The meat, free of the bones and all visible fat, is now ready for cooking.  
—B.L.





### Prepare the lamb for cooking and make the stock.

If your butcher has not already done so, bone the lamb. (See the sidebar at left.) Each rack will yield two tubular pieces of meat, a larger, flatter one from the loin and a smaller one from the filet.

Trim the meat, cutting away all fat and silver skin, wrap in plastic, and refrigerate. Discard the fat but save all the meat trimmings, scraps, and bones. Break the bones into small pieces with a heavy cleaver (or have the butcher saw them up) and use them to make the stock (see the recipe at right).

**Prepare the vegetables** as required. Arrange them, covered, in separate bowls so that you can add each of them to the steamer at the right moment. Set up your vegetable steamer.

**Cook the lamb.** Two hours before you plan to sit down at the table, take the lamb out of the refrigerator. Salt and pepper the meat generously and set aside, covered, in the kitchen so that it rises to room temperature. Raising the meat's temperature 30° or 40°F before cooking allows you to cook the center of the meat to medium rare without overcooking the outside. After the meat is warmed, you should never keep it uncooked for use later. For health reasons, you *must* cook the meat after it comes up to room temperature.

Fifteen min. before serving the asparagus, heat 2 Tbs. of olive oil in a heavy skillet that's large enough to hold the meat without crowding. Use two pans if necessary. Over medium to high heat, sauté the large pieces of lamb, pushing and turning them frequently so that they brown and cook evenly. After 3 or 4 min., add the filet pieces and continue cooking. The room-temperature lamb will cook quickly, particularly the filets. I like lamb quite pink but not blood rare.

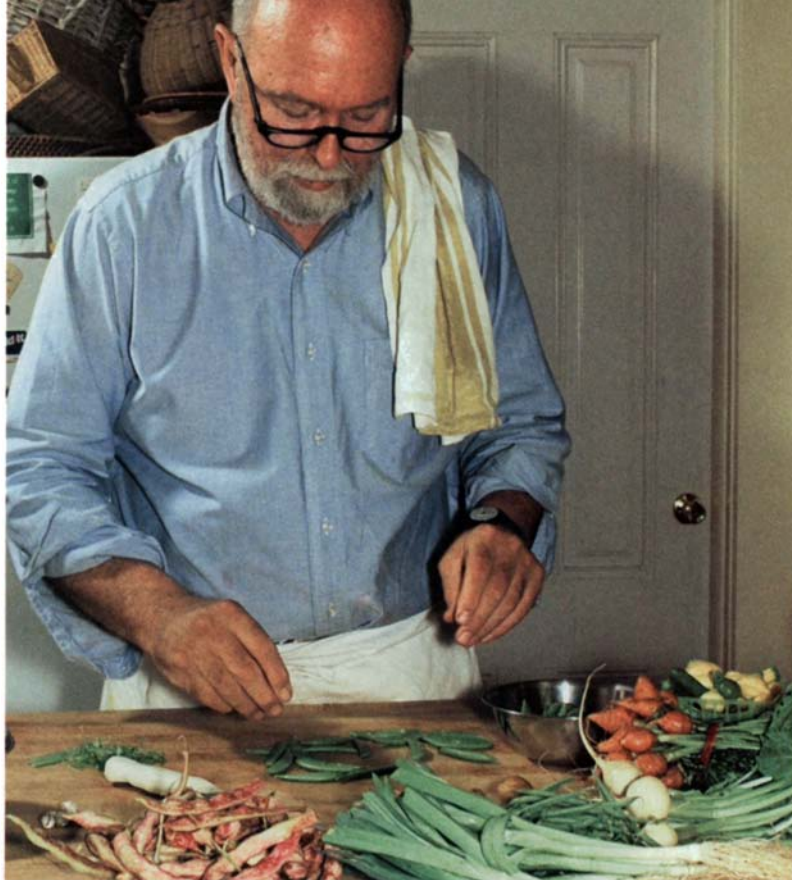
Because the cooked loins will be resting in a warm place while the asparagus is eaten and the vegetables and the lamb sauce are prepared, you should undercook the meat somewhat. As it rests, it will continue to cook as the heat penetrates to the center. When the lamb is cooked satisfactorily, place it on a rack on top of a larger plate. (Meat that's allowed to sit in the hot juices that drain from it as it rests is liable to taste stewed.) Cover loosely with aluminum foil and keep warm.

**Prepare the sauce and the vegetables.** Drain the grease from the skillet, and, back on the fire, add the shallots and then the lamb stock, bringing it to a boil as you scrape the bottom of the pan to dissolve the caramelized cooking juices. Cook for a few minutes and taste. If the sauce seems flavorful enough to you, set the pan aside. If not, reduce it a little more.

Just before serving, steam the vegetables, starting with those such as potatoes, heads of young garlic, and creamer onions, which take the longest time to cook. At the appropriate moments, continue to add vegetables until, at the last, you throw in those like zucchini and fresh fava beans that take only a few minutes. Ideally, everything will be done at the same moment.

Remove the cooked vegetables to a bowl and roll them in a couple of teaspoons of olive oil, only enough to make the vegetables glisten (lacking good olive oil, use butter). Salt and pepper them liberally, rolling again to coat everything evenly.

Put the sauce on the heat and, when it comes to a simmer, salt and pepper to taste. Add the juice from the resting meat and, just before serving, swirl in the butter and half the chopped herbs. Slice each large loin crosswise into six pieces and the filets into as many pieces as you have guests.



Divide the sauce among warm dinner plates. In the center of each plate, arrange the loin slices and a piece of filet. Scatter the vegetables around the meat at random, sprinkle with the rest of the chopped herbs, and serve.

### LAMB STOCK

This stock makes a flavorful base for a sauce to accompany many lamb dishes. You can prepare the stock the day before you plan to use it. *Makes 2 cups.*

**3 Tbs. olive oil**  
**Lamb scraps and bones from 3 loin racks**  
**1½ large onions, chopped coarse**  
**3 large carrots, chopped coarse**  
**6 cloves garlic, crushed but not peeled**  
**12 sprigs fresh thyme or 1 tsp. dried thyme**  
**6 sprigs Italian parsley**  
**1 bay leaf**  
**Water**

Over medium to high heat in a large, heavy pot, heat the oil. Brown the bones and scraps, the onion, the carrot, and the garlic. Stir frequently to prevent scorching. When the meat and bones are nicely browned, add the herbs and stir for a minute until you can smell the oils from the heating thyme.

Almost cover the bones with cold water (5 to 6 cups should do it), and bring to a boil. Skim off any scum that rises to the surface and then lower the heat so that the liquid just simmers. Reduce slowly until only 2 cups of liquid remain. Discard the bones. Strain the stock through a fine sieve, pressing with the back of a spoon to extract all the liquid. After the stock cools, skim off and discard any grease that has risen to the top of the stock.

*Select vegetables with an eye to color. The author prepares sugar snap peas, fresh fava beans, baby leeks, tiny string beans, baby squash, and small turnips, carrots, and potatoes. No extra work is required, because they're all cooked in the same steamer—each vegetable added at the appropriate time.*

*The first time Bruce LeFavour ever worked in a restaurant was the day he opened The Paragon in Aspen, Colorado, in 1965. He has also owned restaurants in Idaho and most recently in California's Napa Valley, where he still lives. ♦*



# Conquering San Francisco

You *can* make bread with a thick crust, moist crumb, and tang

***Workingman's sour-dough.** The author bakes these crusty and sour loaves at home throughout the week, despite working a 9-to-5 job. He fits bread-making into his schedule by using two complementary sour-dough starters—one to make the dough rise and the other to flavor the bread—and by taking advantage of sourdough's naturally long rising time.*

Photo: Sloan Howard



# Sourdough

avor at home

BY PHIL VAN KIRK



Photos except where noted: Suzanne Roman



*Check for consistency. Mixed properly, the San Francisco sourdough starter comes off a spoon in sheets (left). If the starter is too watery and drools off the spoon (center), it quickly exhausts its food supply, and its flavor is diluted when mixed into the bread dough. If it's too thick (right), the starter will take longer to get sour.*

**F**ive years ago, after living in Northern California for fifteen years, I moved back to the East Coast. Soon I began to long for the soul-satisfying tang of San Francisco sourdough bread. Unable to locate a good source for truly sour and crusty loaves, I decided to make it myself. Two hundred batches later, I'm happy to report that it's possible to make world-class sourdough breads at home.

I'd heard that sourdough starters are fickle and fussy in comparison with commercial yeast. There is some truth to this rumor. Before you can produce consistently good sourdough bread, you need to get acquainted with a starter and to discover how often it needs to be fed, how long it takes to make dough rise, and what flavor it gives to the bread.

Once you've figured out your starter, though, it will give you bread with wonderful, haunting flavors and a remarkably flexible bread-making schedule. Since sourdough breads have long rising times, I can mix the dough at night, form it into loaves the next morning, and bake the bread that evening after work. I've made the schedule even more flexible by using two complementary starters—one for muscle to make the dough rise and one to give the bread tang.

## FINDING A GOOD STARTER

A sourdough starter is a batter that contains wild strains of yeast and lactobacilli bacteria. Wild yeasts work more slowly than commercially produced yeasts, and the leisurely rising time allows intriguing flavors to develop in the bread. The lactobacilli

bacteria produce acids that give sourdough bread its legendary tang.

Wild yeasts feed on starches and sugars and produce the carbon dioxide that makes bread rise. Yeasts produce the greatest amount of carbon dioxide right after they've been fed, then less and less until they've exhausted their food supply. Lactobacilli digest the same meal and give off acids. They slowly produce more and more acid, making the starter tangier the longer it sits. This means that a starter has the most vigor to make dough rise right after it's been fed, but not much tang. As it sits, it loses its rising ability but develops a more sour flavor.

You can create sourdough starters by luring wild yeasts and lactobacilli to a good meal. In a glass or ceramic bowl, mix two cups of flour with two cups of either warm water, yogurt, milk, or the water that potatoes have been cooked in. Cover the bowl with a clean dishtowel or cheesecloth and let it sit in a warm spot for three to four days, stirring it once a day. If it bubbles and has a pleasant, sour smell, you have successfully attracted airborne yeasts and friendly bacteria. You then feed this culture a mixture of flour and water or thinned mashed potatoes until you have enough active starter to work with. If instead the starter turns moldy or has a peculiar smell, discard it and try again.

The two problems with making a starter are that your kitchen may not have enough airborne yeasts to colonize the bait, and if the flour mixture does attract wild yeasts, there's no guarantee that the cap-





#### **Bubbly potato starter.**

*This robust and speedy riser feeds on boiled, puréed potatoes, sugar, and water, and produces consistently light and moist bread.*

#### **Stretch and tuck.**

*After dividing the dough and working it in his hands to force out trapped air, the author shapes each half into a dome-shaped loaf. He rolls the outside of the dough and pokes the edges together to form smooth, round loaves.*



tured microorganisms will make the dough rise well or give the bread a pleasant taste. In the beginning, I made a couple of these starters from scratch, but they didn't give the bread the flavor or the texture I was looking for.

Next I sought out proven cultures, which you can beg or buy. A friend gave me part of her starter, which had been fed on mashed potatoes. The very first loaf I made with it was a beauty: it rose perfectly and had a dandy brown crust. The potato in the

starter made the texture spectacularly moist and chewy. The only flaw was that the flavor wasn't the least bit sour.

As nice as the potato starter was, it was only scratching half my itch. I needed that sourdough tang. About a year into my sourdough research, I was elated to find a mail-order source in Idaho for a dried culture that contained *Lactobacillus sanfrancisco*, the bacteria unique to the Bay Area that gives San Francisco sourdough bread its characteristic flavor. Although the starter gave all the tang I was looking for, I just couldn't coax it to produce anything but hard, crumbly

bricks. I liked the taste of the bread it made too much to abandon the starter, so I worked to enhance its rising ability.

After dozens of tests, I solved the problem by combining the potato starter with the San Francisco starter when I mixed the dough. The robust potato culture made the loaves light, while the flavorful but wimpy San Francisco culture gave the bread its proper tang.

At first I was skeptical about using two starters. Maintaining them both was more work, and keeping two took more space in the refrigerator. By using

them together, however, I've sidestepped the problem of catching a starter when it still has enough vigor to make the bread rise *and* has become sour enough for my taste. Hundreds of tasty loaves later, I wouldn't think of making sourdough any other way.

#### **MAINTAINING AND PRIMING THE STARTERS**

I feed the starters regularly to replenish what I've used, to keep the yeast and lactobacilli active, and to prime them for the next round of breadmaking. Once a week, I feed my San Francisco starter equal parts of unbleached white flour and water, though I'll adjust the amounts if necessary to keep the consistency like that of warm yogurt.

The San Francisco culture needs at least 48 hours at room temperature after feeding to develop sufficient tang. Once the starter is sour enough, I make bread with some of it and put the rest in the refrigerator to use later in the week. The cold temperature of the refrigerator slows the metabolism of the yeast and bacteria, preventing the starter from getting too sour.

I feed the potato starter every two weeks. The meal is boiled Idaho potatoes, water, and sugar, mixed quickly in a blender to the consistency and sweetness of a milk shake. The potato starter often doubles in volume while it eats, and stays active and bubbly for at least 24 hours. When it stops bubbling, I put it back in the refrigerator.

#### **DOUGH (AND WHY I DON'T USE A SPONGE)**

Unlike other sourdough bakers, I seldom make bread within 24 hours of feeding my starters, and I don't make a sponge. I wait two or three days until the starters settle down so that the dough will rise slowly overnight or while I'm at work. Many breadmakers first make a sponge before they mix the dough. A sponge is a soupy mixture of starter and flour that rises for several hours, allowing the yeast to multiply and the flour to ferment and develop more flavor. I don't bother making a sponge because I put a lot of yeasty, flavorful starter in the dough. Also, the long rising time characteristic of sour-

In order to be a  
sourdough bread maker,  
you have to be willing  
to feed the masses.  
You'll have millions of  
hungry microorganisms  
depending on you.  
Happily their needs  
are few and their  
diet simple.



**Stone and steam.** Loaves sit on a clay pizza stone as they bake. The hot stone cooks the bottom of the bread, forming a thick, dark-chocolate-colored crust. Water poured into the pan on the oven floor quickly vaporizes into steam, which crisps the top of the bread.

doughs allows complex, intriguing flavors to develop without taking the time to make a sponge.

**Additions to influence taste and texture.** Although San Francisco sourdough is traditionally made with just flour, water, culture, and salt, I didn't have much luck using the classic formula with my starter. The bread was stiff and crumbly. By using the mashed potatoes in the potato starter, I improved the color and texture of the crust and made the interior moist. A scant tablespoon of olive or safflower oil per loaf makes the interior of the bread more springy and gives the crust better color. Milk powder contributes to the formation of a darker crust and makes a subtle but wonderful taste improvement: it helps create the lingering sweet flavors that you taste after the tang.

This bread tastes wonderful when made with white flour or part whole-wheat flour. I've had excellent results using flour made from an ancient type of wheat called *spelt*, which is less bitter than regular whole-wheat flour.

## MAKING THE BREAD

I mix together 6 cups of unbleached bread flour, 2 cups of San Francisco starter, 1 cup of potato starter, 2 tablespoons of olive oil, 3 tablespoons of nonfat dry milk, and 1 tablespoon of salt, and knead the dough until it's satiny and smooth, about 15 minutes. I let the dough rise until it's about 2½ times its original size. (Depending on the ambient temperature and how active the starters are, this can take 8 to 12 hours.) Then I punch down the dough to release trapped air, divide it in half, and form each part into a round loaf.

I put the loaves on a peel that's well-covered with cornmeal, cover them with a moist towel, and let them rise. In 4 to 6 hours, the loaves have doubled in size and are ready to bake. If I want the loaves to rise more slowly than this, I'll stick them on the cool back porch or in the refrigerator.

I like bread with a really crunchy crust and chewy crumb. The perfect loaf has a bottom crust that's the color of bittersweet chocolate and a top crust that's

a little lighter. I bake on a pizza stone to get the dark bottom crust and put steam in the oven to ensure a crisp top.

I preheat the pizza stone on the bottom of the oven for 45 minutes at 500°F. Five minutes prior to baking, I take the stone off the floor, put it on the bottom shelf, put a pizza pan on the bottom of the oven, and turn the heat down to 425°. I slash the top of each loaf with a razor blade, and then I slide the loaves off the peel and onto the baking stone. As soon as the loaves are on the stone, I pour about a cup of water into the pizza pan and quickly shut the door so the steam doesn't escape. I bake the loaves until the crust is very dark, from 50 minutes to an hour.

## COOLING AND STORING

Sourdough bread freezes well. As soon as a loaf has cooled completely, I put it in a resealable plastic bag and toss it in the freezer. The bread emerges, after a 2-hour thaw, virtually the same as fresh.

At room temperature, the aging process quickly robs sourdough bread of its textural charm. Take heart, though: you can banish the curse of flabby crust and cardboard crumb. Keep a plant mister near the toaster and spray stale slices before toasting. With practice you can recreate the exact moistness of the original loaf.

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*While he was in college, Phil Van Kirk dreamed about running a restaurant. After working for a couple of years in California bakeries and restaurants, he decided to pursue a career in printing and publishing instead. He's continuing his quest for the perfect crust by building a wood-fired brick oven in his back yard. ♦*

## SOURCES FOR SOURDOUGH STARTERS

**King Arthur Flour Baker's Catalogue**, PO Box 876, Norwich, VT 05055; 800/827-6836; fax, 802/649-5359. Sells sourdough wheat and rye starters, which are shipped only in the cooler months, from November to mid-May.

**Sourdoughs International Inc.**, PO Box 993-A, Cascade, ID 83611; 800/888-9567; fax, 208/382-3129. Sells dried sourdough starters from San Francisco, Yukon, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, France, Austria, and Russia. Catalog available.

**Scrumptious Sourdough**, 3605 Arctic Blvd., #2149, Anchorage, AK 99503; 907/248-3910. Offers a dried sourdough wheat starter.



# Macaroons

Simple ingredients make a classic cookie

BY JANE SPECTOR DAVIS

I have been happily baking and eating macaroons for many years, but only recently did I realize that within this tiny cookie lie centuries of history and tradition. The basic recipe for this delicate confection, based on almond, egg white, and sugar, has survived thousands of miles as it left its original home in Spain and travelled around the world. While the macaroon is fascinating in terms of history, you can enjoy making macaroons for more practical reasons—they're quick to make, they can

be made days or even weeks ahead of time, and, of course, they're delicious.

## A CULINARY TREK

Long before Columbus, bakers in Spain were making confections from the almonds that grew abundantly in the country's sunny climate. Still today, there are convents in Spain legendary for their handmade almond macaroons. In the famous year of 1492, Spanish Jews fleeing the Inquisition settled in other countries



*Almond Pistachio Macaroons have a long and illustrious history. Delicious results depend on the right ingredients, careful measurements, and a close eye on the oven.*



*Hallmarks of a good macaroon—light and crisp exterior, moist and chewy interior.*

around the Mediterranean—to Italy, Greece, Turkey, and many Arab countries (the Jews enjoyed excellent relations with the Moors when they ruled Spain).

The Spanish (Sephardic) Jews took their favorite recipes with them, and as almonds had been growing in these other regions since Biblical times, they were able to continue their traditions of almond confectionery, while adapting their recipes to local ingredients. The macaroon soon acquired names in the languages of its new homes—*macarone* in Italian, *maruchino* in Turkish, *hagdi badam* in Arabic. As well as new names, new flavors were introduced to the basic recipe, such as the rosewater and pistachio nuts in my recipe, which are used in Arab cuisine.

In America, almonds flourish in the California sun. Their ready availability and reasonable cost make them a staple ingredient in today's fine baking, whether in recipes brought by immigrants or in those developed on American soil.

## REDISCOVERING THE HANDMADE MACAROON

Through the centuries, the macaroon remained a favorite of Jewish holiday cuisine, with a starring role at Passover, when all foods must be flourless. Today, most Passover macaroons in America are commercially made with coconut in a variety of flavors, though vanilla and chocolate predominate.

French pastry chefs include *meringues aux amandes* (almond meringues) among their beautifully made *petits gâteaux* (cookies), and Italian pastry shops offer a selection of macaroons, from the soft and chewy *riciarelli* of Siena to fragrant and crunchy *amaretti di Saronno*.

Unfortunately, this emphasis on professionally made macaroons meant that home cooks thought all macaroons came from either a tin or a fine pastry shop, and so many have lost touch with the tradition of baking macaroons at home. I think it's time to reverse this trend and to begin a new tradition for

this wonderful cookie, which deserves a place year-round among the home baker's favorite recipes, especially now that so many of us are looking for healthier dessert recipes. Nut oils are mostly mono-unsaturated. A study published in the March 1993 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* states that nut oils show promise in helping to lower cholesterol, especially almond and walnut oils. Egg whites are, of course, fat-free. Our ancestors may not have been as aware as we are of these nutritional benefits, but they knew that macaroons were a treat worth preserving for generations.

The challenge in making a macaroon lies in its simplicity: when there are few ingredients, each one becomes very important, and there is little room for error. When the challenge is met, the reward is an exquisite taste and delicate texture, crunchy on the outside and soft and moist on the inside.

## PREPARING THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS

The ingredients for macaroons are inexpensive and easy to obtain, but each one must be understood and handled properly in order to get the desired results.

**Almond paste** is a dense, sweet paste of commercially ground almonds, sugar, and almond flavor. It's available in small cans or tubes in most supermarkets or specialty food stores, and it keeps well for months. The flavor of almond paste can't be duplicated at home because true almond paste contains oil of bitter almonds. Bitter almonds and apricot pits contain a toxic chemical that must be neutralized by commercial processing. The FDA prohibits the import or sale of bitter almonds to consumers. You can grind almonds and sugar yourself, but the taste won't be the same as almond paste. Note that marzipan is not the same thing as almond paste, though the two products share the same ingredients. Marzipan is made to be sweeter (and sometimes contains corn syrup) and has a slightly grainier texture.



**Sugars**—I use granulated sugar and sifted confectioners' sugar in this recipe. The granulated sugar's molecular makeup helps give the cookies crunch and also helps to blend and aerate the almond paste. The sugar crystals have sharp edges that act like tiny knives, cutting into the almond paste and drawing in air at the same time. The confectioners' sugar gives additional sweetness while keeping the interior of the cookie tender—using all granulated sugar would make the cookie too crisp. Confectioners' sugar also contains a small amount of cornstarch, which helps bind the batter.

**Egg whites**—To avoid any risk of salmonella contamination, when handling raw eggs, be sure to clean your counters, hands, and tools before moving on to the next ingredient. Laying a sheet of wax paper on the counter when working with the eggs makes clean-up easy—just bundle up the paper, egg shells, and any drips and discard.

Egg whites become looser and better able to incorporate air when they're warmed to room temperature. That's why when egg whites are beaten alone to be used as leavening in cakes and soufflés, they should be at room temperature. In macaroons, the egg whites are used for their binding properties and only secondarily as leavening, but they should still be left at room temperature for about 30 minutes.

**Flavorings**—Here's where you can have fun. My recipe calls for rosewater, which is used in Mediterranean countries and is available in fine grocery stores, specialty food stores, or Middle Eastern stores. Yes, it's made from roses, and it gives a lovely scent to your macaroons. But you can also use a fine vanilla extract, or an almond liqueur like Amaretto,

or a dark coffee. I don't recommend using almond extract for flavoring because I think it has an artificial, cloying taste.

**Nuts**—In keeping with the Mediterranean theme, this recipe calls for unsalted (and undyed) pistachios, another nut from the ancient Middle East that's now at home in California. The natural green color is delightful in almond macaroons. I like to chop them so there are some big chunks as well as fine bits; the uneven texture adds to the handmade appeal. You can substitute chopped unblanched almonds for the pistachios—I think the skin gives a bit of lovely almond brown and adds more flavor than if blanched almonds were used. Pine nuts are good, too.

### BAKING TIPS

Macaroons will train your eyes to watch for subtle color and texture changes. Every good baker loves a challenge, so here are a few notes to get you started.

**Measuring by weight**—Baking is chemistry: each ingredient has specific characteristics that perform different functions, beyond the simple function of providing flavor. For instance, eggs leaven by trapping air; they carry flavor and create tenderness because of the fat in the yolks; and they bind because of the properties of the whites. It's crucial, therefore, that all ingredients combine in the right proportion. Dry ingredients, such as the sugars, nuts, and almond paste in my recipe, along with flour, chopped fruit, and chocolate, can be measured more accurately by weight (on a scale) than by volume (using a measuring cup).

**Flourless baking**—Without the binding properties of the gluten that is found in wheat flour, flour-



*Measuring by weight is more accurate than measuring by volume, so the author uses an electronic scale; the digital display is mounted on the wall.*



*A properly cooked macaroon will pull away easily from the parchment when cool. Its underside will be an even light brown.*



*Davis pinches the batter after mixing in the confectioners' sugar—when ingredients hold together, it's time to add egg whites.*



*The right consistency. The batter is fine-textured, light in color, and almost fluffy after the final phase of beating.*



*Shaping the cookies. A small ice-cream scoop is ideal for shaping, making it easy to release the sticky batter and ensuring uniformity of shape.*

less baked goods are fragile and should be handled with care. On the positive side, they have unmatched intensity of flavor, because there's no wheat batter to dilute the taste. Flourless macaroons will stay fresher longer than cookies made with flour. When stored in a tin or wrapped in plastic, they will remain unspoiled for weeks, with just a gradual shift in textures—more crispy and less chewy.

**Creaming almond paste and sugar**—It's crucial to blend these two ingredients (and subsequently the egg whites) correctly. The almond paste is very dense, and so you'll need to use a heavy-duty mixer, such as a KitchenAid, with a paddle. Don't try to make this in a food processor—you'll burn out the motor. Trust me, I found out the hard way!

**Testing for doneness**—When completely cool, the ideal macaroon will have a crunchy, slightly cracked meringue-like shell and a moist and chewy center. While the cookie is still hot, however, the outside will seem soft. It's critical to learn to recognize the point at which the cookie makes the transition from too soft and wet to perfectly cooked. The properly cooked macaroon will look slightly puffy. When gently squeezed or pressed, it will be soft, yet you'll feel that it has "set up" and is not flabby or mushy. When lifted, it will pull away from the parchment paper without sticking. The underside will be an even light brown.

### **ALMOND-PISTACHIO MACAROONS**

The technique of combining almond paste and sugar is the same as for creaming butter and sugar, but almond paste is heavier than butter, so you must beat longer.

*Makes 32 macaroons.*

18 oz. (2 cups) almond paste  
7 oz. (1 cup) granulated white sugar  
7 oz. (2 cups) sifted confectioners' sugar  
½ cup (3 to 4 large) egg whites  
2 tsp. rosewater, vanilla extract, or liqueur  
⅛ tsp. salt  
4 oz. (1 cup) unsalted, undyed chopped pistachios

**Mixing the batter**—Divide the almond paste into pieces (about ¼ cup each) and put them in the bowl of a heavy-duty mixer fitted with a paddle. (Don't use a food processor; the batter is too heavy.) Add the granulated sugar. Quickly turn mixer on and off a few times to draw the sugar into the mixture so it doesn't fly out of the bowl. Work on a low speed until the mixture forms coarse, even crumbs. Don't allow the mixture to go beyond this point to a paste, because it will be difficult to incorporate the confectioners' sugar. Turn off the mixer and add the confectioners' sugar. Mix on a low speed for 1 min. and a medium speed for 1 to 2 min. until the mixture is very smooth and begins to compact itself around the sides of the bowl or when pinched. Scrape the sides and bottom of the bowl.

**Adding whites and flavorings**—Add the egg whites, rosewater, and salt. Mix on a medium speed until combined, but still moist and tacky. Scrape down the sides and bottom of the bowl and paddle. Turn the mixer to a medium-high speed for 2 min. or longer, until the mixture is light in texture and almost white in color. Reduce to a low speed, add half the pistachios, and mix until combined.

**Shaping**—Heat the oven to 325°F. Line 2 or 3 good-quality cookie sheets with bakers' parchment. Use a #40 (1½-in.) ice-cream scoop to shape the macaroons. No scoop? Use a heaping tablespoon. (You could also use a pastry bag, but only if you have very strong hands.) Place scoops of batter on the prepared cookie sheets, leaving room between each one. Sprinkle each macaroon with pistachios, and press down slightly so that the nuts stick. Some will fall off, but you can save them after baking and use them for the next batch, or have a toasted pistachio treat.

**Baking and cooling**—Bake the macaroons for 25 to 28 min. They should be puffed and light and still feel a little soft but not wet. The bottoms will be very light brown, not dark. Put the cookie sheets on a rack and let the macaroons cool completely before moving. Carefully peel the cookies from the parchment and store them at room temperature in an airtight container.

*Jane Spector Davis is the baker and owner of Ganache in Evanston, Illinois, a bakery offering handmade products, including macaroons, wedding cakes, and chocolate desserts. Before opening Ganache ten years ago, Davis was a historian and an avid home baker. ♦*





# From Simple and Distinct

Knowing how foods  
blend is key  
to appreciating  
the dish

BY GAIL VANCE CIVILLE

In my work as a sensory analyst, I examine how food looks, feels, and tastes. Over the last few years, I've been thinking about a theory to describe how these food sensations are organized within the full range of cuisines. I've had lots of fragmentary ideas, but I hadn't been able to pull the theory together until a colleague asked, "Why does stew taste good when left over, but Chinese food tastes terrible the next day?"

Answering this question has led me to think that all dishes fall into four categories according to how appearance, texture, and flavor interact and are perceived by the diner. The categories are based on how much or how little the ingredients are blended within the dish.

## 1—A FUSION OF FLAVORS

Think curries. This group includes the most highly blended foods—dishes that combine several ingredients that are cooked or marinated together, usually for a long time. In these dishes, the liquids intermingle to blend flavors and colors, resulting in a single impression. These dishes are often found in Italian, French, Mexican, East Indian, and other cuisines

in which the main ingredients are cooked together in a sauce, sometimes puréed together, and held for hours or days.

So what happens to a dish when its ingredients reach this high level of blending? The flavor "notes"—the individual components of flavor, such as astringency, bitterness, spiciness—are so mixed that it's difficult to separate them. For example, in a basic tomato sauce, the "skunky" or sulfurous character of tomato is softened by an onion-garlic complex. Likewise, the green fragrance of herbs smooths off the rough edge of the green "viney" character of the tomato. The recipes for dishes in this category are designed to include ingredients that, through time or cooking (or both), will blend to yield a distinct new flavor—in this case, marinara sauce.

In most Category 1 foods, textures as well as flavors are blended. The ingredients soften with cooking so that the characteristics of hardness, moistness, and roughness or smoothness of all the ingredients are similar. Color, shape, surface texture, and gloss blend as well.

## 2—CONTRAST AND BALANCE

Think stir-fry. Foods processed together

for a shorter time do not completely blend to make for a unified sensory experience. In Chinese stir-fry, freshly prepared ratatouille, or fruit-at-the-bottom yogurt, for example, the elements tend to work with each other, but are not lost to each other. Unlike foods in which the elements are almost fused into a new flavor, the ingredients in Category 2 dishes present bursts of individual flavor notes that balance with one another. In yogurt with fruit, we are hit with separate bursts: the dairy complex (including cultured milk taste, cooked milk taste, and perhaps butterfat) and the fruit complex (containing some remaining fresh fruit notes as well as the cooked fruit flavors of the fruit mixture).

In stir-fried dishes or freshly prepared ratatouille, not only do the ingredients retain much of their own flavors, but also the textures and appearances keep their integrity. The crisp or chewy or satiny sensations stay separate, as do the various cubes, strands, rounds, or feathered shapes. In many Asian cuisines, ingredients are added solely for the purpose of adding texture and visual interest—lotus root for crunch and its lacy pattern, tree ear fungus for chewiness and glossy undulation.



# to Complex and Melded



### 3—SEPARATE BUT COMPLEMENTARY

Think the traditional American dinner plate. With meat (or poultry or fish), a vegetable, and a starch, the sensory interest in this traditional meal comes from the contrasts and complements of flavors, textures, and visuals on the plate. Even a novice cook knows that dishes of different colors create interest in the meal. The items are expected to “go together” but to maintain their own identity by being placed separately on the plate. They rarely actually blend, especially since the eating experience is usually sequential, not simultaneous—a bite of chicken, a forkful of potato, a nibble of salad.

### 4—PURE AND DISCRETE

Think Japanese. Not only are the food items separated in space, as on the American dinner plate, but Japanese foods are often separated in time, with each dish served as a separate course to emphasize its simplicity and purity. Each item is perceived in its least complicated form, no frills, nothing to add to or detract from the “star” item on the plate.

Look at sashimi (raw sliced fish) as an

example of a dish in its least complicated form: the appearance, flavor, and texture are easily accessible through the uncluttered treatment. Though the fish may be accented with grated carrot or a sprig of green watercress, the color, shine, and visual texture are plain to see. The pure fish flavor with its briny, sweet, and salty subtleties is more readily perceived without herbs, sauces, or marinades. The contrasting flavor of soy sauce or wasabi is only added at the diner’s discretion.

While not all Japanese dishes are so austere as sashimi, most are nonetheless very pure in appearance, flavor, and texture. Broths are made from only two or three ingredients, and many dishes are cooked using water instead of oil, which helps them retain their natural flavors and textures. The overall impression of the meal is a series of simple and pure sensations (visual, savory, and tactile) to be experienced and appreciated singly.

### USING THE CATEGORIES

Think about these categories when you’re choosing recipes or selecting items from a menu. Try to recognize the nature of dishes that you like. For example, Indian food

may be a favorite, but you can’t say precisely why; it’s not the ingredient flavors per se that you enjoy so much. It’s something else. Knowing that Indian food falls into Category 1, you’ll realize that blending many ingredients (some of which you may dislike by themselves) into a complex yet unified whole creates an entirely new flavor that you crave. Conversely, if you’re a sashimi lover, knowing you like discrete bursts of pure, unalloyed flavor can lead you to discover new delights in Category 4.

The four categories I’ve described are, of course, generalized divisions of the vast and complex field of cooking. Some dishes will fall squarely within one category, while others may straddle two. Absolute categorization is not important. Being able to think systematically (as well as intuitively) about cooking and eating is important.

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*Gail Vance Civile, president of Sensory Spectrum, Inc. of Chatham, New Jersey, is a sensory analyst of foods, pharmaceuticals, and other consumer products. She teaches professional courses and has written several articles and a textbook on sensory evaluation techniques. She was assisted by Michael Civile on this article. ♦*





*Gulyás is a hearty blend of beef, onion, vegetables, and paprika. The authors' version has carrots, parsnips, potatoes, and tiny egg dumplings called galuska.*

# Hearty Hungarian Stews

Goulash and its kindred make satisfying suppers

BY MARIA & LORANT NAGYSZALANCZY



After we came to the United States from Hungary in the mid-1950s, we continued to cook the simple, nourishing foods we loved in our homeland. Nearly forty years later, we still make these dishes regularly. Over the intervening decades, we've refined some of the recipes to suit our taste and to accommodate the ingredients that are available in the United States.

*Gulyás* (commonly spelled *goulash* and pronounced *goo-yash*) was born on the Hungarian plains. The ancient Hungarians were cattle-herding people. They called the herd of cattle *gulya*, and the simple beef soup they made *gulyás*. To make the very lean and tough beef tender, they cooked it slowly in a kettle with water and flavored it with onions, vegetables, and herbs such as parsley and sometimes marjoram. Spices like black pepper were too expensive for herdsmen.

When finally pepper plants arrived in Hungary from America (via the Turks), they flourished in the good soil and climate. Both the fresh fruit and the ground paprika, which was made from dried red peppers, were quite welcome. The paprika gave to the dishes a beautiful red color that had never been seen before in Hungary. The flavor varied from gentle and mild to burning hot, and paprika was readily available. The potato arrived from America about the same time, so the perfect combination—beef, onion, paprika, and potato—could be combined in the *gulyás*.

## GULYÁS AND ITS RELATIVES

The *gulyás*-type dishes that we cook fall into three groups: "true" *gulyás*, *pörkölt*, and *paprikás* (pronounced *pap-ri-kash*).

**Gulyás**—The true *gulyás* is a soup made with onions, cubed beef, paprika, and cubed potato. Vegetables might be added too, and it is always served with bread. During the winter hunting season in Hungary, *gulyás* was eaten outdoors. At home it was served as part of a simple dinner, usually followed by a pasta dish. Among all the variations, most frequently seen in Hungary is the *Székelgyulyás* (Transylvanian *gulyás*), made with pork, onion, paprika, and sauerkraut.

**Pörkölt** is a thick stew, probably derived from the *gulyás*. This is the dish that's called "Hungarian goulash" in the West. Its major ingredients are meat, onions, fat, and paprika (no potatoes), and it requires pasta, rice, or potatoes on the side as a complement. The meat can be beef, lamb, veal, pork, chicken, or even wild meat such as boar. *Pörkölt* is made essentially the same way as *gulyás*, but with less water added (or none at all), so that it's a stew rather than a soup.

**Paprikás** is similar to *pörkölt*, but sour cream, or occasionally sweet cream, is added at the end. There



are many kinds. Most famous are chicken *paprikás* and veal *paprikás*.

A very good vegetarian dish is the *gomba* (mushroom) *paprikás*, which we make in our home quite often. Hungarians also enjoy another vegetable variety, *krumpli paprikás* made with potato, onion, paprika, green pepper, and tomato. This simple but tasty dish is a staple food of the Hungarian common people, who can afford to eat meat only once or twice a week.

Of the many, many variations of these dishes, we most often make *gulyás*, *pörkölt* made with beef or beef and pork, *paprikás* made with chicken, veal, mushrooms, or potatoes, and *Székelgyulyás*.

## SELECTING INGREDIENTS

These dishes all depend on the taste and color of the paprika; therefore, it's important to choose it carefully. When buying paprika, examine the color, smell, and taste. The color should be bright red, the smell must not be moldy, and the taste should be just to your own preference—as mild or as hot as you like it—without any bitterness. In Hungary, you can find as many as two dozen varieties of paprika, from mild to burning hot. We buy paprika at a Hungarian grocery, but the Szeged brand available at most supermarkets is perfectly acceptable.

In general, the hotter the paprika is, the less red it is, because the light-colored veins and seeds are ground in with the pepper flesh to produce the most

*Cooking up Hungarian specialties. The Nagyszalanczys have been making gulyás-type dishes since they came to the United States in 1956. One refinement is to clean mushrooms a day ahead and let them sit on the counter until it's time to use them. This gives the mushrooms more intense flavor and prevents them from giving up so much liquid when cooking.*



**Red-pepper paste adds color and flavor.** In many dishes, the authors like to use this mixture of puréed red peppers and salt in place of plain salt.



heat. You can buy both the mild and the hot and mix to your taste; most Hungarian cooks do that. If you do use hot paprika, start with less than half the amount given in a recipe and add as needed.

In addition to paprika, we frequently use a salty red-pepper paste in place of salt. This paste is simply a purée of red peppers ground in the food processor with noniodized salt added. (See the recipe on the page opposite.)

Onions are just as important as paprika. When we came to the United States, we tried to make *pörkölt* with Spanish onions, but they gave the dish too hearty and rich a flavor. We find that red onions are closest in flavor to Hungarian onions. Before using the onion, we taste a small piece because some of them are bitter. We always cut them at the last minute; they might get bitter while standing in the air too long. Also, the dense root end is where a lot of the bitterness is concentrated, so we're careful to cut that part out.

In general, beef in Hungary is leaner than American beef, so we buy the leaner cuts, such as round or rump. Cooking takes longer than with more tender cuts, but we think these dishes taste better with less fat. Fresh ham is also fine in place of pork. Veal here is quite different from that in Hungary. Hungarian calves are slaughtered before weaning, so the flesh is light, with a very delicate taste. Veal *paprikás* made here won't have the same taste as it does there. And the chicken dishes will taste different, too, unless you find a free-range chicken.

In Hungary, fat for cooking is most often lard. Butter is also used frequently, but never in *gulyás* or *pörkölt*. Instead of using lard, you can prepare these dishes with a cooking oil that has little or no taste of

its own and won't burn at higher temperatures, such as peanut oil.

Finally, sour cream is sweeter in the United States than it is in Hungary. Some cooks mix a little buttermilk in it to make it tarter, but this doesn't seem necessary to us. In fact, we sometimes make *paprikás* with heavy cream instead of sour cream. The taste is even milder.

## GULYÁS WITH DUMPLINGS

This soup is similar to the original meal prepared by cattlemen on the Hungarian plains. If you can't find Hungarian bread, use the best Italian or French you can buy. When the soup is done, make tiny dumplings (*galuska*) to finish it off. We like to serve a red Hungarian wine, such as a *Bikavér*, with *gulyás*. Serves four.

### FOR THE SOUP:

1 large red onion, diced or grated  
2 Tbs. lard or oil  
2 lb. lean beef, cut into ¾-in. cubes  
2 tsp. paprika, more or less to taste  
1 green pepper, sliced  
2 tsp. red-pepper paste (see recipe at right) or 1 tsp. salt  
1 large potato, peeled and cut into chunks  
1 large carrot, peeled and cut into chunks  
1 large parsnip, peeled and cut into chunks

### FOR THE DUMPLINGS:

1 egg  
Salt  
About ½ cup flour

**Make the soup.** In a deep pot, sauté the onions in the fat until they turn a light golden color. Add the beef and brown it on all sides. Add the paprika and a few slices of the green pepper, the red-pepper paste or salt, and a little water to prevent burning. Cover and simmer for about 1 hour, checking and adding water periodically if needed. Then add the rest of the green pepper, the potato, carrot, and parsnip, and as much water as you like, depending on how much broth you want. Cover and cook until the meat is tender, about 30 min. Taste for salt.

**Make the dumplings.** In a small bowl or a cup, beat the egg with a pinch of salt. Add enough flour to make a sticky paste and stir until perfectly smooth. Take up a small amount of the paste—less than ⅛ tsp.—on the tip of a teaspoon and dip it into the boiling soup to release it. Continue until all the paste is used. Let boil another minute and then serve in soup bowls with thick slices of Hungarian bread on the side.

## GOMBA PAPRIKÁS

(Mushroom *paprikás*)

The day before we make this, we always clean the mushrooms and let them sit, uncovered, on the counter. This enhances their flavor and prevents them from exuding so much liquid while cooking. If you want this dish to be more colorful, sauté thin strips of red pepper with the onion. Two red wines that would go well with this are merlot and pinot noir; for white, a riesling would be a good choice. Serves four.

1 lb. medium to large mushrooms  
2 Tbs. butter or oil  
1 large red onion, chopped fine  
Black pepper  
1 tsp. paprika  
Salt  
½ cup sour or heavy cream





*Ready for the cream, which makes it paprikás. Sour cream is added to browned mushrooms, onions, a few red pepper strips for color, and paprika before the paprikás is spooned over pasta.*

Wipe the mushrooms and let them stand in a dry, room-temperature place all day or overnight. Slice them  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. thick.

Melt the butter in a large frying pan and cook the onion slowly until transparent. Transfer to a plate. Increase the heat to high and add a third of the mushrooms and a dash of black pepper. Stir constantly and cook the mushrooms quickly so that they brown but don't soften. If you haven't had time to let the mushrooms sit out, be sure to cook until all juice they exude is evaporated. Repeat until all the mushrooms are browned. Lower the heat and stir in the onion, paprika, and salt. Then add the sour or heavy cream, heat, and serve over pasta.

### RED-PEPPER PASTE

We like to use this paste in place of salt for the additional flavor and color it gives. Don't use iodized salt, which contributes a chemical taste.

**2 lb. red peppers, cleaned and cut into pieces**  
**8 oz. noniodized salt**

Clean the peppers and cut them in pieces. Purée the peppers to a paste in a food processor. Mix in the salt, put into jars, and refrigerate. It will keep indefinitely. Use it with soups, *gulyás*, and *paprikás* dishes instead of salt.

### SZÉKELY GULYÁS

(Transylvanian *gulyás*)

It's all right for the meat used in this dish to be slightly on the fatty side. Sliced Hungarian sausage can also be added with the pork. Because of the sauerkraut, Alsatian wines, such as gewürztraminer or riesling, go particularly well with this dish. *Serves four.*

**1 large red onion, chopped fine**  
**2 Tbs. lard or oil**  
**2 lb. pork butt, cut into  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. cubes**  
**1 green pepper, sliced**  
**1 tsp. paprika**  
**1 small tomato, peeled and sliced**  
**2 tsp. red-pepper paste (see recipe at left) or 1 tsp. salt**  
**Black pepper**  
**1½ lb. sauerkraut, drained and rinsed**  
**1½ cups sour cream, plus more for garnish**

In a deep pot, sauté the onion in the fat until light brown. Add the meat and brown it. Then stir in the green pepper, paprika, tomato, red-pepper paste or salt, a pinch of black pepper, and enough water to cover the bottom of the pan. Cover and cook for about 45 min., stirring occasionally and adding a little water if needed.

Mix in the sauerkraut and a little water or some of the sauerkraut juice if it isn't too tart. Continue cooking until the meat is tender. Taste for salt and then mix in the sour cream. Don't boil the sour cream. Serve topped with a spoonful of sour cream and accompanied by Hungarian bread.

*Maria and Lorant Nagyszalanczy cook their Hungarian specialties at their home in Sherman Oaks, California. Luckily, there's a Hungarian grocery not far from their neighborhood where they can stock up on imported food products from their homeland. ♦*



*For a more pronounced mushroom flavor, make mushroom paprikás with heavy cream instead of sour cream. The result is delicious.*



# Roast Chicken with Honey-Thyme Vinaigrette

Make everyday chicken something special

BY SARAH STEGNER



*To make the skin as crispy as possible, and to add herbal flavor to the chicken, the author brushes it generously with thyme oil before and during roasting.*

In my cooking at the Chicago Ritz-Carlton, I like to use vinaigrette sauces with more than just salads. Fish, poultry, and meat are all delicious when accented with this tangy, acidic sauce. This style of saucing makes sense for home cooking, too, because a vinaigrette delivers loads of flavor without requiring time-consuming stocks and lots of other ingredients.

I think a perfect partner for a warm vinaigrette is roast chicken. The chicken in this recipe is brushed with thyme oil and roasted on a bed of vegetables. After it's cooked, all you have to do is blend the juices and seasonings that have accumulated in the pan with vinegar, oil, and other flavorings. The result is a vinaigrette sauce that has complex flavors but is easy to prepare. The chicken can be served with a mix of salad greens, wilted just slightly by tossing with some of the sauce. Boiled new potatoes would be a nice accompaniment to round out the meal.

There are three main components to this dish: the chicken, roasted on a bed of celery and onion, which makes for more flavor and keeps the chicken from sitting directly on the roasting pan and sticking; the thyme oil, which is olive oil blended with lots of fresh thyme, giving it a potent herbal flavor; and finally the shallot vinegar, made by infusing red-wine vinegar with lots of sliced shallots.

I love the flavors in this recipe because the strong herbal fragrance of the fresh thyme is great with chicken, and the red-wine vinegar is balanced by lavender honey. You could use the same technique with other herb-and-vinegar combinations, too, maybe pear and red-wine vinegar with fresh tarragon.

## INFUSING THE VINEGAR

To get the best flavor, the vinegar should be prepared 24 hours in advance, if possible. If you're in a

hurry, try adding the shallots to the roasting pan when you add the vinegar to deglaze (see below). The flavor won't be quite the same, but it's an acceptable shortcut.

**To prepare the vinegar,** combine sliced shallots and vinegar in a bowl, cover, and refrigerate for at least a day and up to a week. The vinegar becomes more pungent the longer it marinates, so when you think it has enough shallot flavor, strain it and refrigerate it until it's time to use it.

## FRESH THYME FOR COLOR AND FRAGRANCE

Thyme oil is used for basting the chicken as it roasts, as well as for whisking into the sauce. Only fresh thyme will do, giving the oil a strong perfume and a bright green color. Use the oil within three days because the color and flavor will fade after that.

**Blend the oil and thyme.** Strip the thyme leaves from the stems. (You're aiming for about a third of a cup loosely packed leaves, but having a little less is all right.) Combine the thyme and olive oil in a blender and process them until the thyme is completely incorporated into the oil. Cover and store the thyme oil in the refrigerator, and then strain before using.

## ROASTING TIPS FOR MOIST CHICKEN AND CRISPY SKIN

My goal when roasting a chicken is to end up with crispy golden skin and moist flavorful meat that's perfectly done—both the delicate white meat and the denser dark meat. I like to start my chicken at a really high heat to crisp the skin and seal in some of the juices, and then finish cooking it in a moderate oven. Brushing with thyme oil during cooking adds more flavor and makes the skin crisp and brown.



## ROAST CHICKEN WITH HONEY-THYME VINAIGRETTE

Serves four.

6 small shallots, sliced  
 ½ cup red-wine vinegar  
 1 large bunch fresh thyme  
 ½ cup olive oil  
 3-pound chicken  
 3 tablespoons coarse salt  
 Freshly ground black pepper  
 4 medium ribs celery, chopped  
 1 medium onion, chopped  
 1 tablespoon lavender honey or other floral honey

Mixed salad greens (such as romaine, Bibb, frisée, red oak leaf), washed and torn in pieces (optional)



Serve the roast chicken on a bed of slightly wilted mixed salad greens, tossed with some honey-thyme vinaigrette. The vinaigrette sauce delivers loads of flavor without requiring time-consuming stocks.

When we roast poultry in the restaurant, we often cook it until the breast meat is done, carve off that portion, then return the bird to the oven, and continue cooking until the dark meat is done. You may not want to try this method at home because carving the hot chicken takes an experienced hand. Instead, just cover the breast meat halfway through cooking with a couple of large, hardy lettuce leaves, such as romaine. This protects the meat, but doesn't stick to and tear the skin the way a "tent" of aluminum foil might.

**To roast the chicken,** first remove any giblets from the chicken and pull off all excess fat. Rub the skin and the cavity with coarse salt, let the chicken sit for about an hour, and then wipe off all the excess salt. (This salting process is optional, but I think it gives the chicken a better flavor and texture.)

Heat the oven to 500°F. Brush the chicken generously with some of the thyme oil and season with freshly ground black pepper.

Put the celery and onion in a flameproof roasting pan, season with salt and pepper, and then put the chicken on top of the vegetables. Roast the chicken at 500° for 15 minutes, then reduce the heat to 350° and continue cooking until the juices from the cavity run clear when the chicken is lifted, another 45 to

50 minutes. If the breast meat is cooking too quickly, cover it with one or two of your lettuce leaves.

When the chicken is cooked, remove it from the roasting pan and keep it in a warm place. Put the roasting pan directly on a burner and turn the heat to medium high. (Don't forget that the pan has been in the oven and will be very hot.) Add the vinegar to the vegetables and chicken juices in the pan (add the shallots, too, if you haven't infused them with the vinegar) and boil until the liquid reduced by about half, scraping to dissolve any drippings from the bottom of the pan.

Strain the liquid into a small, deep-sided bowl and press on the vegetables with a spoon to extract their juices. Now whisk in the honey. Taste the sauce. The oil from basting and the accumulated chicken juices serve as the "oil" part of the vinaigrette, but if the sauce is too sharp, whisk in a little more thyme oil to mellow it. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

*To protect the delicate breast meat, the author covers it halfway through the roasting time with some lettuce leaves from her salad greens.*

Sarah Stegner is chef of The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton Chicago. Among other awards, she was named 1992 Chicago Woman Chef of the Year. She recently spent a few months training at the Michelin two-star restaurant Pierre Orsi in Lyon, France. ♦



# Cast-Iron Cookware

It's inexpensive, cooks well, and will last for generations

BY RUTH ROHDE LIVELY



*The original nonstick pan. Well-seasoned cast iron has a stick-proof surface that's easy to clean. Thick, dark, and durable, cast iron heats slowly and holds heat well, rendering it suitable to both low- and high-heat cooking. In addition to frying, skillets are great for baking, too. The recipe for the puff pancake shown here appears on p. 52.*

Before Calphalon, before Teflon, before Club aluminum, there was cast iron. For generations, cooks have relied on this material's durability and heat-holding capacity to make everything from pancakes to stews to fried green tomatoes. Despite the trend toward high-tech wonders, cast iron survives. Why? There are many good reasons. Cast iron browns food beautifully, cooks evenly, and is widely available and inexpensive. And there are health benefits, too. Studies show that certain foods cooked in cast iron can contain considerably more iron; some more than double their available iron content.

There are other reasons I keep reaching for cast-iron pots and pans when I have copper, stainless-steel, aluminum, and enameled vessels on hand. I'm intrigued by the fact that the nonstick finish in my cast-iron utensils has been developed, a layer at a time, over years. And I find it very satisfying to use the same pot my husband's grandfather cooked his stews in, or my great-grandmother's griddle, or my mother's corn-stick pans.

There are disadvantages to cast iron. One is its weight. The stuff is heavy. A 10-inch skillet weighs around 4½ pounds, while a 10-quart Dutch oven comes in at a hefty 22 pounds. The second drawback is that cast iron isn't great for cooking highly acidic foods such as fruits or tomato sauces because they'll eat the finish off the interior of the pot. It doesn't hurt the food or the pot, but I'm not willing to sacrifice my hard-won cast-iron finishes. I'd rather cook high-acid foods in enameled cast iron or stainless steel.

Also, it takes time for a truly nonstick coating to develop. That's why well-seasoned pans are prized and

handed down from one generation to the next. For an expert's advice on this subject, see the sidebar at right.

There are two camps when it comes to cleaning cast iron—those who wash their cast iron and those who don't. According to the people who do, washing in a mild soapy water and scrubbing with a plastic scrub pad doesn't harm the finish. The other camp wouldn't think of letting soap touch a seasoned pan. I find that a good rinsing in hot water, followed by a rub with a tablespoon or so of salt, is usually all it takes to get a pan clean.

## HOW CAST-IRON POTS ARE MADE

There used to be a number of foundries in this country making cast-iron cookware. With the advent of cheap, lightweight, fast-heating aluminum, followed by upmarket lines of anodized aluminum or stainless steel sandwiched with copper or aluminum, the use of cast iron declined. Today there are only two U.S. makers, Lodge Manufacturing and Wagner's General Housewares. Cast-iron cookware is also manufactured abroad, and it's not unusual to find Taiwanese skillets next to those from Lodge or Wagner.

Despite some automation at the foundries, the process of casting has remained essentially unchanged over the last hundred years. Cast iron is made by combining cast scrap (returns from previous castings), scrap steel, and pig iron with small amounts of other elements that help control strength, fluidity in pouring, brittleness, and hardness. These elements are heated to 2800°F and then poured into sand molds. When the molten iron is cooled and hardened, it's broken out of its mold.

# Seasoning and cleaning cast-iron utensils

BY BILLIE HILL

Well-seasoned cast iron is truly stickproof and easy to clean. Most problems arise from using an improperly seasoned utensil, or from not maintaining the finish, usually by bad cleaning habits.

**SEASONING NEW CAST IRON**—The only time I ever wash cast iron in hot soapy water is when it's brand-new. Washed and dried, it's ready for seasoning. I don't like to use oils for this. Corn, olive, sunflower, and peanut oil are too thick to be absorbed quickly into the porous cast iron, and sometimes they leave a sticky coating. I prefer melted vegetable shortening, such as Crisco. I drop a soft cloth into the melted shortening, which has the consistency of water, wring it out, and wipe the utensil inside and out, covering every surface. Cast-iron lids must be seasoned the same way. I then put the cookware into a 350°F oven, *upside down* (with a drip pan on the shelf below) and bake for at least an hour, usually two. Every 30 minutes, I take the cookware out and lightly wipe the inside again with a thin coat of melted shortening. At the end of the two hours, I turn the heat off and let the utensil cool in the oven. The seasoning process has begun, but it is by no means complete.

**FURTHER SEASONING**—A well-seasoned utensil is one that's been coated many times with fat, which penetrates the pores of the iron and forms a coating on the surface. There are several ways to continue seasoning. For a skillet, simply fry bacon in it for a month or so. Don't wash it; just drain off the grease, rinse with scalding water, wipe dry, and store until the next use. Use Dutch ovens and deep pots at least half a dozen times for frying or popping popcorn before attempting any watery cooking, such as making soups, stews, or roasts.

Then the utensil is cleaned, sharp edges are ground smooth, and it's given a protective wax coating.

## HOW CAST IRON COOKS

Although hard and durable, cast iron is also porous and brittle, especially when new. It expands when heated and contracts as it cools. Heated quickly and unevenly, a new utensil is liable to crack or break as the hot area expands and the cool area tries to stay put. This can be a problem with large pieces like griddles or fish fryers that extend far beyond the reach of a gas ring or electric element. The answer is to heat large pieces slowly. Eventually, when they're seasoned and



**MAINTAINING THE FINISH**—Remove cooked food immediately from a cast-iron vessel. While the utensil is still hot, rinse it in hot water and, if necessary, scrub with a stiff bristle brush or rub a spoonful of salt on the interior. Don't let it air-dry. Instead, wipe the utensil with a soft cloth. If you live in a humid climate, you can add a protective coating by spraying the just-dried item inside and out with Pam or a similar spray. Then wipe it dry with a paper towel. Don't store cast iron with the lid on: the least bit of moisture trapped inside could cause the pot to rust.

Should food stick badly to your cast-iron utensil, fill it with water, boil it on the stove, and then scrub it with a stiff brush. Most of the time, this will do the trick. If you have to scour, use a plastic scouring bun. Using a wire scouring bun means the utensil will have to be reseasoned. Likewise, after cooking high-acid foods, such as tomatoes, beans, and fruits, you'll need to season it again in the oven.

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*Billie Hill is a customer service representative for Lodge Manufacturing in South Pittsburg, Tennessee. She's been cooking with cast iron all her life.*

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*New and old cast iron. Many people don't associate the shiny, new utensils on store shelves with the black ware they have at home. With use, cast iron turns black through oxidation and the seasoning process. The unseasoned skillet on the left has a polished finish. With good care and a lot of use, it will have as smooth and satiny an interior as the other.*

their pores are filled with oil, the range of expansion and contraction is reduced, and the danger is past.

Compared with copper or aluminum, cast iron heats up slowly, but it holds heat well. And because it's thick, cast iron heats evenly, without hot spots, which suits it for cooking at high heat.

Everyone knows that cast iron is perfect for cooking food in fat—for frying bacon, potatoes, pancakes, and chicken, for popping popcorn, and for deep-fat frying. Due to its excellent ability to brown foods, cast iron is also great for baking. Cornbread and biscuits are probably the most frequently cited examples. Two dishes I always bake in my No. 8 (10½-inch) skillet



A few of many cast-iron utensils. Skillets, Dutch ovens, griddles, and muffin and corn-stick pans are among the most popular cast-iron items, but you could almost outfit a complete kitchen with the stuff, right down to the wok and the waffle iron.



**Watch out for rough spots.** Well-cast and -finished pieces shouldn't have rough edges that were missed by the grinder. But if they do, you can usually smooth off rough areas with a file.

are puff pancake (see the recipe below) and *tarte Tatin*, an upside-down, caramelized apple tart. And because cast iron holds heat well, it's ideal for long, slow cooking, like stewing, braising, and simmering.

#### WHAT'S AVAILABLE AND WHERE TO FIND IT

There's a huge variety of cast-iron cookware. Skillets and Dutch ovens come in several sizes. In addition, there are chicken fryers, fish fryers, and deep fryers, griddles, cornbread pans, muffin pans, covered kettles, and camp cookers—large pots that sit up on three legs so you can set them right in the coals. Lodge also makes a waffle iron, a wok, even a cast-iron grate that fits in a Weber grill.

There are two kinds of finish to cast-iron pieces. Most commonly, you'll find the natural finish, which is dark gray in color and slightly pebbly in texture. Some pieces have a polished finish, the result of one extra step in the manufacturing process. The polished surface is smoother and slightly shiny, but it doesn't necessarily improve how the utensil cooks.

Housewares departments and kitchen stores sell cast iron, but you can also find a reasonable selection at many hardware stores. Antique shops, flea

markets, and yard sales are good places to find vintage pieces. I bought my favorite skillet and accompanying lid at an estate sale. The skillet is beautifully cast and well seasoned, perfectly smooth to the touch, with an interior that looks like black satin. At \$17 for both, they were a steal. More likely, however, the finish will be less than perfect. Pennsylvania potter and artist Jeanne Sollman cooks almost exclusively in cast iron and likes to buy used pieces. If one is caked with baked-on grease, she puts it in her kiln and fires it to around 1000°. The crust and grime turn to dust and can be removed with a wire brush. She then starts the seasoning process all over again. You could accomplish similar results by running the utensil through the cleaning cycle of a self-cleaning oven, which reaches 850° to 900°.

Whether you're buying new or used, look for a piece that has been correctly finished. It should have no rough spots around the edges or on the handle (see photo at left). If there are places the grinder missed, you can simply smooth them off with a file.

*Ruth Rohde Lively uses her cast-iron cookware in New Haven, Connecticut.* ♦

#### MAKING A PUFF PANCAKE IN CAST IRON

Baking a puff pancake is a great way to season a skillet because nothing ever sticks to the pan, well lubricated as it is with butter. A puff pancake, traditional Saturday morning fare in our household, is simply a thin batter of eggs, flour, and milk that's baked in a sizzling hot skillet. In the oven, the edges of the pancake creep above the sides of the skillet and the center puffs dramatically. It comes out deliciously golden brown and crispy on the bottom. This is a perfect breakfast for two, and it's a cinch to whip up while the coffee's brewing. *Serves two.*

2 eggs  
½ cup flour  
½ cup milk  
Dash of salt  
4 tablespoons butter

Set the oven to 450°F and put a large skillet or Dutch oven in to heat. In a bowl, beat the eggs, flour, milk, and salt together. It's important to mix all the ingredients together at once; otherwise, your pancake won't puff. The more air you beat into the batter, the higher it will rise in the oven. When the oven is hot, toss the butter into the skillet and let it melt. Pour the batter into the skillet and return it to the oven. Bake for 12 to 15 min., or until the pancake is puffed and golden. Cut in half and serve immediately with warm maple syrup, coffee, and the morning paper.

*Icy texture and intense flavor characterize granitas. Most are based on puréed fruits. The flavors in the colorful palette at right are: 1—Green Kelsey plum; 2—Sunset plum; 3—Rhubarb-cinnamon-rosemary; 4—Peach-champagne; 5—Italian plum; 6—Mango; 7—Red raspberry; 8—Pineapple-vin santo; 9—Blueberry-pomegranate; 10—Golden raspberry.*



# Granitas

Scraped Italian ices are coolly refreshing, intensely flavorful, and easy to make

BY DIANE POSNER MASTRO

I am a lover of flavor: the lush flavor of ripe raspberry, or the warm, sunny flavor of blood-orange zest. If cakes and tarts are the novels of flavor, then surely granitas—those intensely flavored Italian scraped ices—are the poems of flavor.

You could think of granitas as the first snow cones. Sicilian peasants would gather pure mountain snow into cloth bundles, take them back to the village, and add crushed fruit and juices. For me, though, a good granita is more than just a flavored ice. It's an example of the characteristic Italian love and respect for flavor.

Granitas are easy to prepare. You don't need any special equipment—some tool for puréeing the fruit, a covered container, a large spoon or ice-cream scoop, and a freezer. Almost any fruit can form a



granita base. What's more, granitas are fat-free and use relatively small amounts of sugar because they derive most of their sweetness from the fruit.

### WHAT IS A GRANITA?

Most granitas are made by combining fruit purées with simple syrup, which is a mixture of sugar and water. I always add a pinch of salt and a little lemon juice to fruit granitas to bring out the flavor and to balance the sweetness. And I frequently include a couple of tablespoons of a wine or liqueur to enhance the base flavor. The mixture is frozen until solid; it's then scraped and served like ice cream.

There are obvious similarities between granitas and sorbets, which are also frozen desserts made with fruit purées and simple syrup. The main difference between the two is their texture. Sorbets often contain beaten egg white and are processed in ice-cream machines, which gives them a silky, creamy texture. Granitas contain less sugar, which allows ice to form in larger crystals. And the fact that granitas are simply frozen and then scraped further contributes to their icy texture. The root of the word granita, *grana*, means grain and describes accurately this dessert's texture; it is quintessential fresh fruit flavor captured in tiny chunks of ice.

While usually eaten as a dessert, a granita can also act as an intermezzo between two very flavorful courses—a little something to mitigate the richness of the previous course, cleansing the palate for the next dish. An icy granita, with its clean, fresh taste, is perfect in this role. In my restaurant, I often serve intermezzo granitas, perhaps a blood-orange–rosemary granita between a rich, gorgonzola-sauced pasta and a grilled lamb chop, or a tomato–sage granita between a pasta *alla carbonara* (with egg, pancetta, and cheese) and a seared swordfish steak. My intermezzo granitas are less sweet than dessert granitas.

### THE COMPONENTS OF GRANITA-MAKING

All granitas are made pretty much the same way. The differences lie in how the fruit is prepared.

**The simple syrup** sweetens the fruit purée and brings it to the correct consistency to produce the desired texture when frozen. Because sugar and water content varies from fruit to fruit and from crop to crop, I sometimes have to adjust the weight of simple syrup I add. Watery produce like tomatoes or melons need a heavier syrup, one made with a greater proportion of sugar to water.

Making the simple syrup is easy. You just cook



sugar and water together until it boils, stirring occasionally. Then cool the syrup and store it in the refrigerator, where it will keep for several weeks. It's best to have the syrup made ahead and chilled, because warm syrup won't give you the most accurate indication of the flavor of the frozen granita. Flavors are slightly dulled by cold.

I frequently infuse the syrup with herbs or even nuts to add another layer of flavor to a granita. To make an infused syrup, tie fresh herb leaves or sprigs or a handful of nuts in cheesecloth or a muslin infusion bag, and cook with the sugar and water. (If you have a fine mesh strainer to pour the finished syrup through, you can throw the herbs or nuts loose right into the pot.) When the mixture boils, take it off the heat, let it steep for twenty minutes, and then remove the flavorings. Left to steep longer, they might leave a tannic, bitter aftertaste. I always taste an infused syrup before using it, to be sure I like its flavor. If you already have simple syrup on hand, you can infuse as much as your recipe calls for by bringing it to a boil again with the herbs or nuts and letting it steep.

**Choose and prepare the fruit with care.** Look for fruit that's at its peak of ripeness but not overripe. Full flavor, sweetness, and juiciness are important, too. Some fruits, like mango, pineapple, and all the soft summer berries, need only to be puréed with a

*Scraping a mango granita. Using an ice-cream scoop or a heavy spoon, Mastro scrapes toward her body in several short strokes until she's shaved enough of the granita to form a solid ball. She removes the ball to a chilled bowl and repeats the procedure until she's scraped as many servings as she needs.*

**Double-duty labels.**  
Because Mastro constantly varies the flavorings, she labels the containers carefully. She includes not only the ingredients but also the quantities so she can replicate the most successful batches.



bit of lemon juice and a pinch of salt. Firm fruits like rhubarb, pears, and apples need to be cooked to soften them and to release their colors, flavors, and natural sugars. I prefer to cook peaches and plums, too; I find that doing so produces a granita that is more richly flavored, more complex, and more refined than if I use raw peaches or plums.

I pay close attention to the texture of the fruit I'm using, because the texture of the finished granita is every bit as important as its flavor. Watery or fibrous fruits present special problems. Pineapples must be perfectly, fully ripe, and they must be puréed in a food processor until they're as smooth as can be. Otherwise, the small fibers will float and the syrup and juice will sink. Melon purées are liable to separate because the fruit is quite watery. Generally, mangoes make a wonderfully creamy, dense granita, but some mangoes are very fibrous. Avoid those, or

strain the purée to remove the fibers.

**Combining the ingredients is a simple step,** but it's the point where some crucial decisions must be made that affect both flavor and texture. I purée salt, lemon juice, and spirits if I'm using them, with the fruit to distribute their flavors better. I know that to get the best frozen texture, I need a mixture that thinly coats a wooden spoon, so if a recipe gives a range of simple syrup, I start with the smaller amount. I taste as I go, correcting with extra salt and lemon juice if the mixture's too sweet; if the mixture is too tart, I add a touch more syrup, some concentrated pomegranate juice (see box, lower left), or some confectioners' sugar mixed with water.

**Freezing takes a day.** I freeze the granita in a plastic container with a tight-fitting lid. You need a container with an opening large enough to allow you to scrape the ice. Flat, rectangular food-storage containers are ideal (see the photo at left). I usually just pop the containers into the freezer and forget about them for a day, but some granitas need occasional stirring until they begin to solidify, to keep them from separating. The tomato-sage granita is a good example. Until you become familiar with how various granitas freeze up, it's a good idea to check them every now and then. If you see signs of separation, stir. After freezing the mixture for approximately 24 hours, you should have a solid (or almost solid) block of ice.

**Scraping takes a little time and effort.** Using an ice-cream scoop or a large spoon, I make a few test scrapes to see how hard the ice is. Some granitas—mango, for instance—scrape easily right out of the freezer. Usually, though, I need to let the granita sit on the counter for about twenty minutes. Then I roll up my sleeves and scrape toward my body with several strokes, transferring the scraped ice to a chilled bowl as necessary. If you want, you can scrape all the granita at once, and put it back in the freezer until it's time to serve it.

Granitas will keep for six weeks in the freezer without deteriorating, but they probably won't be around that long. Serve them in a chilled dish with little cookies or a garnish of fresh fruit or mint leaves.

## Concentrated pomegranate juice

If you make granitas a lot, you might want to keep one particular item on hand. Concentrated pomegranate juice is a staple in my granita ingredient list. Reduced to a syrupy consistency, the dark red-brown juice adds color, flavor, and tartness to granita mixtures that are too pale or too insipid of flavor. I also use this juice to add body when the mixture is too watery. Concentrated pomegranate juice will darken light-colored granitas, like those made of pineapple or green or yellow plums.—D.P.M.

### SOURCES

*Concentrated pomegranate juice, sometimes called pomegranate molasses, syrup, or paste, is available in many Middle Eastern grocery stores. The following stores will ship:*

**Alvand Market,** 3033 Suite G,  
South Briston, Costa Mesa, CA  
92626; 714/545-7177.

**International Food Bazaar,**  
915 SW 9th Ave., Portland, OR  
97205; 503/228-1960.

**K. Kalustyan,** 123 Lexington Ave.,  
New York, NY 10016; 212/685-3451.

**Middle East Trading,** 2505 W.  
Devon, Chicago, IL 60659; 312/262-  
2848. Checks and CODs only.

**Shiraz Food Market,** 7397 SW 40th  
St., Miami, FL 33155; 305/264-8282.

### TROUBLESHOOTING

Granitas are easy to make, but whenever you cook with fruit, things can go wrong. Water content, sugar content, depth of flavor, and depth of color all vary with every batch. Here are some potential problems and solutions. (All quantities are for the size of the recipes that follow.)



**Granita mixture is too sweet**—Add one to two tablespoons lemon juice and a dash of salt to help balance the sweetness.

**Granita mixture is too sour**—Add a little more simple syrup (no more than one tablespoon per cup of mixture). Or whisk a tablespoon of confectioners' sugar in a bowl with just enough water to make a slurry, add to the mixture, and blend well.

**Flavor isn't intense enough**—For any fruit granita where some additional red color isn't a problem, add two tablespoons to half a cup of pomegranate syrup to bring up the flavor (see the sidebar on p. 55). For light-color fruit granitas, add a little vanilla extract or lemon juice. Or make the granita with syrup infused with mint leaves or a vanilla bean.

**Color isn't intense enough**—This is a problem with strawberry granitas. Add a tablespoon of pomegranate syrup to four cups of liquid.

**Granita separates during freezing**—Stir every half hour until the mixture is solid enough so that it doesn't separate.

**Frozen granita is too icy**—If the granita is stubbornly hard to scrape, there's too much water in the fruit or in the simple syrup. Let the granita melt until you can break it into chunks. Spin the ice chunks in a food processor until crushed and refreeze. Then it's easy to scrape. If you make the same granita again with fruit of similar quality, concoct a heavier syrup, perhaps three cups of sugar to four cups of water.

**Mixture is too slushy, won't freeze solid**—There's too much sugar either in the fruit or the syrup. Add up to half a cup of water to the granita, purée again to mix thoroughly, and refreeze.

### **SIMPLE SYRUP**

Simple syrup keeps for up to three weeks. To make an herb-infused syrup, tie eight to ten large herb leaves or two or three sprigs of herbs in cheesecloth or a muslin infusion bag. Cook with the sugar and water, and then let steep no more than twenty minutes. *Makes about 3 cups.*

*2½ cups water  
1¾ cups sugar*

Put the water and sugar in a nonreactive pot and cook over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until the mixture boils. Cool and then store in a covered container in the refrigerator.

### **PEACH-CHAMPAGNE GRANITA**

*Makes about 6 cups.*

*3 lb. ripe peaches (about 10) with skins  
Pinch of salt  
1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice  
3 Tbs. champagne  
1 cup simple syrup*



Photos: Ruth Lively



*Some fruits need cooking to release their flavors and to soften their textures. As shown at left, Mastro cooks blueberries until their skins burst, and then combines them with herb-infused simple syrup and pomegranate juice or wine. Roasting rhubarb with cinnamon sticks and rosemary, above, softens and flavors the fruit.*

Wash and pit the peaches. Put them in a nonreactive pot with the salt, lemon juice, and champagne. Cook until soft, stirring often so the peaches don't scorch. Cool, and then purée in a food processor until smooth. Combine with simple syrup and freeze.

### **TWO PLUM GRANITAS**

Follow the directions for the Peach-Champagne Granita, but use the following ingredients. *Each makes about 5 cups.*

*2½ lb. green Kelsey plums  
Pinch of salt  
1 Tbs. lemon juice  
2 Tbs. Tuaca liqueur (or other orange liqueur)  
¾ cup simple syrup  
OR  
2½ lb. Italian prune plums  
Pinch of salt  
1 Tbs. lemon juice  
2 Tbs. sweet muscat wine  
¾ cup simple syrup*

### **FRESH SUMMER BERRY GRANITA**

*Makes about 5 cups.*

*3 pints fresh ripe berries (blackberries, raspberries, or boysenberries)  
Pinch of salt  
1 Tbs. lemon juice  
¾ to 1 cup simple syrup*

Purée the berries with the salt and lemon juice. Strain to remove the seeds (leave a quarter of the purée unstrained if you want some of the seeds for texture). Combine with the simple syrup and freeze.

### MANGO GRANITA

Makes about 5 cups.

6 ripe mangoes, peeled and seeded  
Pinch of salt  
1 Tbs. fresh lemon or lime juice  
1 cup simple syrup

Purée the mangoes with the salt and citrus juice until smooth. Combine with the simple syrup and freeze.

*Not just for dessert. Served after a rich course, a not-too-sweet granita cleanses and refreshes the palate, preparing the diner for the next dish. The Tomato–Sage Granita shown below is a perfect intermezzo between a creamy pasta and a seared fish steak.*

### ROASTED RHUBARB GRANITA

Makes about 5 cups.

2 lb. rhubarb stalks, washed, trimmed, and cut into 1-in. pieces  
1 cinnamon stick  
1 3-in. branch rosemary  
1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice  
Pinch of salt  
1 cup rosemary-infused simple syrup

Put the rhubarb in a nonreactive baking dish with the cinnamon and rosemary. Sprinkle with the lemon juice and add a pinch of salt. Cover with aluminum foil and roast in a 375°F oven for 40 min., or until the rhubarb is soft. Remove the cinnamon stick and rosemary. Purée the rhubarb, combine with the simple syrup, and freeze.

### BLUEBERRY–POMEGRANATE GRANITA

Makes about 4 cups.

4 to 5 cups fresh blueberries, washed and stemmed  
2 Tbs. fresh pomegranate juice  
1 Tbs. fresh lemon juice  
Pinch of salt  
¾ to 1 cup simple syrup

In a nonreactive pot, cook the blueberries, pomegranate and lemon juices, and salt until the berries soften and begin to burst, releasing their color and flavor. Purée when cool. Combine with the simple syrup and freeze.

### TOMATO–SAGE INTERMEZZO GRANITA

I like this best during a seafood dinner. Use the most flavorful tomatoes you can find. Stirring slows down the freezing process, so make this granita two days before you plan to serve it. You really have to watch the sweetness when making an intermezzo granita. If the mixture tastes too sweet, correct with more lemon juice and salt. Makes about 4 cups.

#### FOR THE GRANITA:

3 lb. plum or medium-size standard tomatoes  
¾ tsp. coarse salt  
¼ tsp. black pepper  
2 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil  
1 to 1½ cups sage-infused simple syrup (see below)  
Juice of 1½ lemons or 2 limes

#### FOR THE SYRUP:

Juice from tomatoes  
2 cups water  
1 cup sugar  
8 to 10 clean, fresh sage leaves

**Prepare the tomatoes.** Score the stem end of the tomatoes and drop them, a few at a time, into a large pot of boiling water for 90 seconds. Transfer them to a large bowl of ice water to cool. Peel, cut in half, remove all the seeds, and cut away any core. Purée the tomatoes in a blender with the salt, pepper, and olive oil. Strain the purée, reserving both the pulp and the juice. You should have about 3 cups of pulp.

**Make the sage syrup.** In a heavy, nonreactive pot, combine the tomato juice, water, and sugar. Tie the sage leaves in cheesecloth or a muslin infusion bag and toss into the pot. Set over medium-high heat and bring to a boil, stirring frequently. Remove from the heat, and let steep 20 min. Remove the sage and let the syrup cool.

**Combine the ingredients.** Start by whisking 1 cup of sage syrup into the tomato pulp. Add the lemon or lime juice to taste, and more salt if necessary. Whisk together. If the mixture coats a wooden spoon thinly, it should be just right. If the coating is heavy, add more simple syrup. Transfer the mixture to a plastic container and freeze. Stir every 30 min. until the mixture starts to become solid, and then leave it to freeze completely.



Diane Posner Mastro's specialty is northern Italian cuisine, specifically the cooking of the Piedmont. She concocts her granitas at Restaurant Enoteca Mastro, the restaurant she co-owns in Albany, California. ♦





Turn fresh pork into sweet and salty cured meat in one week by soaking it in a brine bath of salt, sugar, and saltpeter. When properly cooked, this pork, called *demi-sel*, has a velvety smooth texture that melts in your mouth.

**Demi-sel made from the loin** is shown at right in a dish called *potée*, the French equivalent to New England boiled dinner.

# Home-Cured Pork

Twenty minutes of work and a week's wait turns pork into versatile, velvety *demi-sel*

BY JEAN JACOB



Photos: Robert Mirsala

Some of the strongest memories from my childhood in North Africa are the sights and smells in my uncle's *charcuterie* (pork-butcher's shop). I used to watch him lower cuts of pork into the huge wooden vats of brine that filled his large, open kitchen. When the meat was cured, he would tie one of his long aprons around my waist so that I could help him remove the cured pork, known as *demi-sel*, from the brine vats. The distinctive sweet, salty aroma of *demi-sel* has stayed with me since childhood, lingering like a woman's perfume.

Literally, *demi-sel* means half-salt. In other words, salt makes up about half the curing ingredients that preserve the pork. Sugar and saltpeter are included as well. Curing the pork in this sweet brine for a week gives the meat a smooth texture, pink color, and fresh sweet-salt flavor.

After being pickled in the sweet brine, *demi-sel* is an extremely versatile product in the kitchen, either as a flavoring ingredient in a recipe or featured as a main course. For example, diced *demi-sel* can be used as part of the fat when sautéing onions. After poaching to re-

move some of the fat and salt, *demi-sel* can find a more prominent place in dishes such as peas or potato salad, to which it imparts a fresh, sweet-salt flavor. *Demi-sel* plays a major role in some traditional French dishes, such as *cassoulet* (bean-and-meat casserole, shown at right) and *potée* (the French equivalent of New England boiled dinner, pictured above).

Regardless of how you use *demi-sel*, it's important to keep in mind that the curing method I'll describe here is not a substitute for cooking. While the brine bath flavors the meat and gives it a silky, melt-in-the-mouth texture, the pork is still fundamentally raw and has to be fully cooked before eating.

*Demi-sel* is practically unknown in America, yet it's simple, quick, and quite different in flavor and texture from most hams you can buy. The brine takes minutes to prepare, and the curing process requires nothing more than patience.

## MEAT CUTS TO USE FOR DEMI-SEL

Though most *demi-sel* is usually made with pork belly, many other cuts can be cured this way, and it's

common to find a variety of *demi-sel* pork parts in French butcher shops.

Cuts appropriate for *demi-sel*, from the least to the most expensive, include the boneless neck, shoulder shank, shoulder, bone-in or boneless leg (fresh ham), and loin. Less costly than any of these is the belly of the pig, or sow belly, which is where bacon is cut from. In European butcher shops, the belly includes the boneless breast—the lower tip of the section, which in the United States is used for spareribs. Thus *demi-sel* made with this cut is a bit meatier than plain bacon. To purchase fresh (uncured) bacon, either with or without the boned rib section attached, you will probably have to order from a specialty butcher.

Besides cooking belly *demi-sel* in traditional *cassoulet*, it can also be diced, browned, and included in leafy green salads, in quiche, or in any dish in which you like bacon. Sliced and fried *demi-sel* makes a great sandwich, and the fat rendered during cooking is good for frying onions or potatoes.

Likewise, the meatier cuts, such as shoulder and leg, can be cooked just as you do ham and served in as many ways. I especially like to make *potée* with *demi-sel*, sausages, potatoes, carrots, cabbage, and green beans.

#### THE METHOD

The curing process for *demi-sel* is simple. My proportions for the brine bath are 12 ounces sea salt, 12 ounces sugar, and 4 heaping tablespoons saltpeter in 3 quarts of unchlorinated bottled water. This is enough brine for 5 to 6 pounds of meat. I think the salt from the sea tastes the best, and I prefer bottled water so that there's no taste of chlorine. In the old days, we used rainwater, which is probably not safe now with the acid rain. You can buy saltpeter (sodium nitrate) at any drugstore. It's a white powder that's a partial preservative, and it turns the meat pink.

You'll need a large pot, a sieve, cheesecloth or muslin, a large crockery, glass, or plastic container, and, traditionally, a sterile board to keep the meat under the surface of the brine. Clean all the equipment thoroughly with baking soda and rinse with hot water to reduce the liability of bacterial contamination.

Put the brine ingredients in the pot and bring to a boil, stirring occasionally. Skim off the froth and dispose of it. Let cool. Pour the brine into the crock through a cloth-lined sieve (see the photo above) to strain out any impurities or undissolved salts. Add the meat and submerge the cuts by weighing them down with the board. Now put the crock in the refrigerator. In France, we don't cure meat in the refrigerator, but the climate in Washington, DC, where I have my shop, makes refrigeration a good idea. Af-



Strain any undissolved ingredients or impurities from the brine before combining it with the meat in a crockery, glass, or plastic container.

France's traditional cassoulet of beans and cured meats often includes *demi-sel*, shown here around the edge of the platter.

ter six days, remove the *demi-sel*. It's ready to cook.

Some main-course *demi-sel* preparations I didn't mention (but now can't resist) are *demi-sel* roasted and sliced on top of mashed potatoes, sautéed slices with a succulent raisin and prune sauce, or sautéed slices served on chestnut purée with an apricot sauce, including the pan drippings, of course. Keep in mind that *demi-sel* is salty. When using it in a recipe, be careful not to oversalt.

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Jean Jacob was born behind a charcuterie and practically grew up in the shop. With two of his brothers and now his son, he has run The French Market in the Georgetown area of Washington, DC, for 35 years. ♦



# Earthy Lentils

Gentle cooking and careful flavor pairings elevate this lowly legume

BY KEVIN TAYLOR

Once a forgotten foodstuff in modern American cooking and relegated to the “soup of the day” in country clubs and diners, lentils are starting to get some respect. Often looked upon as a boring food, good for you but not very good, lentils are usually boiled down to a thick, nourishing, but uninspiring mush. But now lentils are showing up on plates where rice and other starchy grains would normally sit. Taking cues from French, Indian, and Middle Eastern cuisines, innovative chefs are incorporating lentils into eclectic menus.

I find lentils an interesting and challenging food to work with. They’re what I call a “food of the earth,” meaning almost earthy in color, consistency, and flavor, and they need to be combined with other big, robust flavors. When cooked properly and combined with the right partners, lentils become a featured part of beautifully prepared dishes.

## MY FAVORITE LENTILS

Lentils, like other legumes, are seeds that grow inside of pods. What distinguishes lentils from the thousands of other legumes such as peas, beans, and peanuts is their double-convex, lens-like shape. In fact, the word *lens* comes from the Latin word for lentil.

There are many varieties of lentils, differing in color, texture, and flavor. I like the meaty green and brown lentils because of the way they hold their shape when cooked. Of these lentils, the finest available are the ones cultivated around Le Puy, France. They are small, round, and have a marbled green and black color that makes them easy to distinguish from other lentils. Le Puy lentils have a more delicate flavor and less starchy texture than the larger, more common brown lentils. Le Puy

*Pair strong herbs with lentils. Both common brown lentils at left and the more delicate French green lentils at right benefit from the big flavor of sage, chives, thyme, rosemary, and parsley.*

## SOURCES FOR FRENCH OR LE PUY LENTILS

**Bess' Beans**, PO Box 1542,  
Charleston, SC 29402; 800/233-2326.  
Checks and CODs only.

**Dean & DeLuca**, 560 Broadway,  
New York, NY 10012; 800/221-7714.

**G.B. Ratto & Co.**, 821 Washington St.,  
Oakland, CA 94607; 800/325-3483.

**Williams-Sonoma**, PO Box 7456,  
San Francisco, CA 94120-7456;  
800/541-2233.

**Zingerman's Delicatessen**,  
422 Detroit St., Ann Arbor, MI 48104;  
313/663-3400.

*Each of these companies offers a catalog.*



lentils also cook quickly and retain their shape well, which contributes to their reputation as the aristocrat of lentils.

Though they're more expensive than most lentils, often \$3 to \$5 a pound, Le Puy lentils are worth trying. If you're not a fan of lentils already, this variety may make you one. Look for these small, green lentils in specialty food stores in boxes labeled *Lentilles du Puy*, Le Puy lentils, or French lentils (see mail-order sources at left).

The larger, mealier, brown and greenish-brown lentils are the kind that people are most familiar with. I love Le Puy lentils for special dishes, but frankly I use the brown lentils more. They're readily available and quite inexpensive. If you take care not to overcook them so that they still have a little bite and hold their shape, they come competitively close to Le Puy lentils in flavor and texture.

### GENTLE COOKING

In dishes other than soups and stews, where lentils are cooked until mushy, it's important that lentils have "bite" to them, though how much is up to you. I like them stiff and chewy, with their skins intact. If they're soft and mushy, then they don't interest the mouth, and they aren't as pretty on the plate. The only exception is when I use lentils to bind other ingredients. Then it's helpful to cook them until they're very soft and easy to purée.

Lentils are quick and easy to prepare. Unlike most beans, they don't need to be soaked first, and they cook thoroughly in 30 to 40 minutes. Before cooking, first rinse and carefully pick through them to remove rocks and pieces of hull that may have gotten through the sorting process. Then cover them with cold water and salt lightly. Gently simmer the lentils, checking periodically to make sure they remain just covered with water. You don't want to flood them with water or cook them too vigorously because that washes out the flavor, breaks up the pods, and makes them mushy. Start tasting the lentils after 25 minutes, and remove them from the heat when they're soft enough to bite through and are no longer crunchy.

Unless you're making them into a soup, rinse the cooked lentils and drain them well. Lentils can be cooked several days ahead and stored in the refrigerator in a sealed container.

### SUCCESSFUL LENTIL DISHES

As with other beans and grains, the final flavor of lentils depends largely on what other ingredients they're paired with. When I construct a lentil dish, I keep five factors in mind. First, lentils work best with vegetables that complement their earthy tones—fennel, carrots, celery, onions, and leeks.

Second, strong herbs, such as rosemary, thyme,

sage, and chives; and spices, like cumin, coriander, turmeric, and black pepper, bring out and enhance the characteristic flavor of the lentils.

Third, a meat, poultry, or fish partner must have a big flavor to hold its own with lentils. High-oil-content fish like salmon or sea bass work well as a background for lentils' flavor. Gamey meats like lamb and venison taste wonderful accompanied by lentils. Bistro dishes, in which cheap but flavorful cuts of meat are simmered or braised until full-flavored and tender, are great vehicles for lentils.

Fourth, lentil dishes need some acidic ingredients to round out their flavor; otherwise, the dishes would be flat and dull. Wine vinegar, red wine, tomatoes, marinated artichokes, and lemon are good sources of acidity to pep up lentils.

Finally, a little fat at the end smoothes the dish. A tablespoon or so of olive oil or butter will soften the sometimes acrid or one-dimensional flavor of lentils.



### LAMB, LENTIL, AND ARTICHOKE SALAD

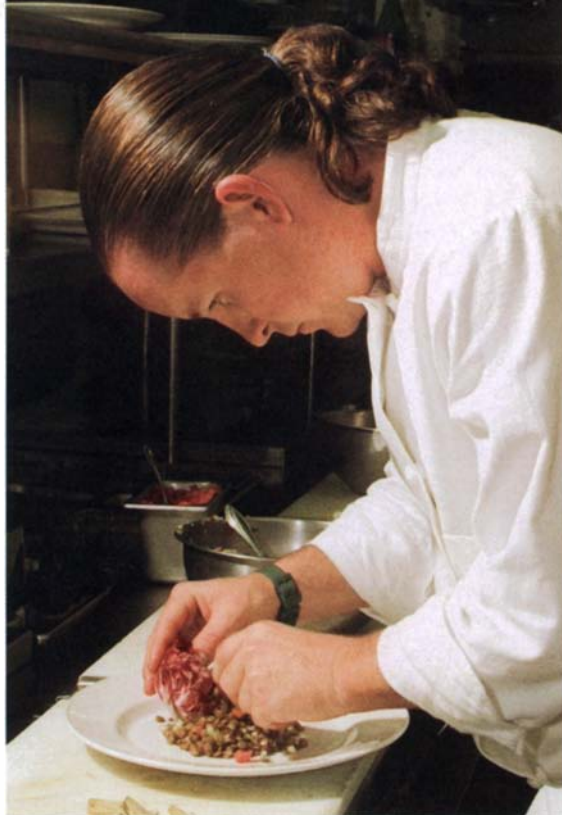
I like to use lamb loin in this salad: when roasted and sliced, it's tender, delicious, and visually appealing. Loin chops, served one per person, are a good substitute if you can't find a boneless loin. This salad also tastes great with leftover cooked lamb. Serves four.

*¾ cup dried lentils*  
*1 tsp. chopped fresh thyme, or ¼ tsp. dried leaves*  
*1 tsp. chopped fresh parsley*  
*1 tsp. chopped fresh sage, or ⅛ tsp. dried*  
*1 tsp. chopped fresh rosemary, or ¼ tsp. dried*  
*½ tsp. minced fresh garlic*  
*8 oz. boneless lamb loin, or 4 loin chops, 1-in. thick*  
*Salt and pepper*  
*Oil*

*The lamb stands up to the bold flavor of the lentils in this salad, while the acidic artichoke hearts and Rosemary-Pepper Vinaigrette add the zing that pulls the dish together.*

*(Ingredient list continued on next page)*





*For a substantial beginning to a vegetarian meal, serve Curried Lentil Cakes. Thin, grilled slices of eggplant envelope spiced lentils, and cumin-flavored vinaigrette adorns and flavors the dish.*

#### **Artful presentation boosts lentils' image.**

To turn homely ingredients into an eye- and mouth-pleasing lamb salad, Taylor arranges a plume of lettuce leaves behind the bed of lentils before he fans the slices of lamb on top.

*½ cup finely diced fennel  
½ cup finely diced tomato  
¼ cup finely diced shallot  
Assorted salad greens—romaine, red and green oak leaf, mâche, arugula, radicchio, endive, watercress  
1 cup quartered marinated artichoke hearts*

#### **Rosemary-Pepper Vinaigrette (see recipe below)**

Put the lentils in a saucepan and cover them with lightly salted cold water. Cover and simmer until tender, about 40 min. Rinse, drain, and reserve.

Mix the herbs and garlic together and rub over the lamb. Season with salt and pepper, and then let the lamb sit for 15 min. to absorb the flavor.

Grill or broil the lamb on a lightly oiled rack 3 to 4 min. on each side until medium rare. Remove them from the heat and keep warm.

Mix the lentils and diced vegetables together and season to taste with salt and pepper. Heat the lentil mixture in a double boiler or microwave until warm.

Mound a quarter of the lentils in the center of each plate. Arrange the lettuce leaves in a cluster behind the lentils. A radicchio leaf on top is a nice touch. Place the artichoke hearts in a semicircle around the front of the plate. Cut the lamb in thin slices and fan atop the warm lentil mixture. Finally, drizzle the salad with the Rosemary-Pepper Vinaigrette.

#### **ROSEMARY-PEPPER VINAIGRETTE**

*Makes 1 cup.*

*⅔ cup extra-virgin olive oil  
4 Tbs. balsamic vinegar  
3 Tbs. fresh lemon juice  
1 shallot  
1 Tbs. fresh rosemary, or 1 tsp. dried  
½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper  
Salt to taste  
½ teaspoon brown sugar*

Put all the ingredients in a blender or food processor and blend at high speed until smooth.



#### **CURRIED LENTIL AND EGGPLANT CAKES**

You'll need about sixteen thin slices of eggplant, about three inches wide, so choose one large, evenly shaped eggplant, or two medium-sized ones. These cakes can be assembled in advance and baked right before serving. They make a nice first course accompanied by salad greens and chopped tomato. *Serves four.*

*1 cup dried lentils  
1 large eggplant, or 2 medium  
Olive oil  
Lemon juice  
Salt  
2 tsp. to 1 Tbs. curry powder  
1 onion, diced  
1 Tbs. red-wine vinegar  
1 small garlic clove, minced  
1 small tomato, peeled, seeded, and diced  
1 Tbs. mixed chopped fresh herbs—thyme, rosemary, parsley, chives  
Fresh cilantro sprigs for decoration*

#### **Cumin Vinaigrette (see recipe at right)**

Put the lentils in a saucepan and cover them with lightly salted cold water. Cover and simmer gently until tender, about 40 min. Remove, rinse, and drain half of the lentils and reserve. Continue cooking the rest until they're very soft; then drain well and purée.

Slice the eggplant lengthwise into ⅛-in. slices. (An electric slicer or mandoline makes this easy.)

Lightly coat the eggplant slices in a mixture of two parts olive oil to one part lemon juice, and sprinkle lightly with salt. Charbroil on a hot grill or broil in the oven until the eggplant has browned slightly, about 1 min. per side. (It doesn't have to be thoroughly cooked at this point.) Leave them to cool.

Put the curry powder in a dry frying pan and toast lightly until it just begins to brown, about 30 seconds. Immediately add the diced onion and 1 Tbs. olive oil and, stirring frequently, cook over medium heat until the onion is soft and caramelized, 5 to 7 min.

Add the vinegar to the pan and deglaze, scraping to



*To assemble the lentil cakes, spoon a mixture of both puréed and whole lentils into molds lined with eggplant slices. Then fold over the exposed ends of the eggplant to cover the filling, making nicely sealed packets.*



dissolve what remains of the onion and curry powder. Add the whole lentils, lentil purée, garlic, tomato, and herbs. Salt to taste. Cook until heated through.

Coat four 8-oz. molds with butter or oil. Line each mold with about four slices of eggplant so that the inside of the mold is completely covered and the edges of the eggplant hang over the mold (see photo above).

Fill each mold with a quarter of the lentil mixture and fold over the eggplant ends to cover.

Bake the molds in a 350°F oven for 20 min., or until thoroughly heated.

Turn out each cake onto a warmed plate and drizzle with the Cumin Vinaigrette. Decorate with a few sprigs of fresh cilantro.

### **CUMIN VINAIGRETTE**

*Makes 1 cup.*

**1 Tbs. chopped fresh cilantro**  
**2 cloves roasted garlic, or 1 clove raw garlic**  
**2 Tbs. fresh lemon juice**  
**¼ cup red-wine vinegar**  
**1 Tbs. ground cumin**  
**½ cup extra-virgin olive oil**  
**¼ cup canola or other vegetable oil**  
**1 Tbs. brown sugar**  
**Salt**

Combine the cilantro, garlic, lemon juice, and vinegar and purée well in a blender or food processor. Strain through a fine mesh sieve.

Put the cumin in a dry frying pan and toast lightly until it just begins to brown, stirring frequently. Add to the vinegar mixture.

Whisk in the oils and brown sugar, and salt to taste. Mix the vinaigrette immediately before using, as the mixture won't remain emulsified for long.

### **PEPPER-COATED SALMON WITH LENTILS**

In my restaurant, I finish this dish with a pinot noir sauce that I make with rich veal stock. For a quicker home version, you can round out the flavors of the salmon and

lentils with a squirt of lemon and a few drops of extra-virgin olive oil, and accompany the dish with a glass of pinot noir. *Serves four.*

**¾ cup dried lentils**  
**½ cup black peppercorns**  
**4 6-oz. salmon fillets, approximately 1½-in. thick**  
**Salt**  
**2 Tbs. olive oil**  
**½ cup finely diced fennel**  
**½ cup finely diced carrot**  
**½ cup finely diced celery**  
**½ cup finely diced leek**  
**½ cup finely diced onion**  
**1 tomato, peeled, seeded, and finely diced**  
**1 Tbs. chopped mixed fresh herbs—thyme, rosemary, parsley, and chives**  
**Extra-virgin olive oil**  
**Lemon juice**

Put the lentils in a saucepan and cover them with lightly salted cold water. Cover and simmer until tender, about 40 min. Rinse, drain, and reserve.

Coarsely crack the black peppercorns on a wooden cutting board with a mallet or the back of a heavy frying pan. Lightly salt the salmon fillets, then generously coat them with the pepper, pressing lightly to stick.

Heat 1 Tbs. olive oil in a frying pan until it's very hot. Add the fennel, carrot, celery, leek, and onion and sauté them until they're translucent and starting to brown. Add the tomato, herbs, and lentils and season with salt. Remove from the heat and keep warm.

Heat 1 Tbs. olive oil in a frying pan and sauté the salmon over high heat for about 3 min. on each side, until the fish is only slightly translucent inside.

Divide the warm lentil mixture among four warmed plates. Top each with a salmon fillet and drizzle the extra-virgin olive oil and lemon juice on top.

*Lentils mellow the spicy heat of Pepper-Coated Salmon. The salmon is served on a bed of lentils sautéed with fennel, carrot, celery, leek, and onion.*

*Kevin Taylor, a professional cook since he was sixteen, opened his own restaurant, the Zenith American Grill, in downtown Denver five years ago. ♦*



# Ganache—A Marriage of Chocolate and Cream

Gentle but resolute handling leads to a successful union of these rich ingredients

BY ORTRUD CARSTENS



Photos except where noted: Suzanne Raman

**G**anache is wonderful. Rich chocolate is mixed into hot cream, and as it melts, fine droplets of cocoa butter disperse into the cream, forming a shiny, silky-smooth mixture. You've probably had ganache in one of its many forms—in truffles and

other chocolate confections, as a filling and frosting in cakes and *petits fours*, as a shiny glaze, as a rich sauce, or as hot chocolate.

Probably originating in the mid-1800s in southwestern France, ganache (pronounced gah-NAHSH) comes from the word *ganacher*, which means to paddle or wade through something—in this case, chopped chocolate and cream. Ganache's uses are many because, by varying the proportion of cream to chocolate, it can be made thin and pourable or thick and dense. Ganache can even be whipped into an airy, moussellike consistency.

To make ganache, you gradually but resolutely stir finely chopped pieces of chocolate into hot cream until all the chocolate is melted. It isn't difficult to make, yet the process is always fraught with tension, because if the cream and chocolate don't come together to form a homogeneous and stable emulsion, the ganache will curdle and turn out dull and wrinkly instead of glossy and smooth. By paying attention to the temperature of the cream and by working slowly and steadily, you can practically eliminate the risk of curdling.

## CHOCOLATE

Any bittersweet, semisweet, sweet, milk, or even white bar chocolate can be used to make ganache. The flavor and texture of the chocolate come through quite clearly, and so it pays to use the best chocolate that you can get your hands on. I prefer to use *couverture*, or coating chocolate, because it's made from higher-quality cocoa beans and is more painstakingly processed than eating chocolate. Most importantly, *couverture* contains at least 32 percent cocoa butter, which gives chocolate its high gloss, smooth texture, and lovely melting properties. You'll pay more for *couverture* because the cocoa butter is the most expensive ingredient in chocolate, but your mouth will know the difference.

There are many good brands of chocolate on the market, like Valrhona, Lindt, Tobler, Suchard, Carma, Cacao Barry, Callebaut, Van Leer, and Nestlé, and each brand has a range of chocolates, from sweet to bitter. I prefer Valrhona's eleven varieties of chocolate

because of their high cocoa-butter content, innovative flavors, multidimensional character, smooth texture, and depth of flavor. You can find Valrhona and other *couvertures* in specialty food shops, and you can order them through the mail from confectionery suppliers (see sources for chocolate, p. 69). Try a few brands in a blind tasting to zero in on your own chocolate preference.

## CREAM

Ganache is usually made with heavy cream, which has between 36 and 40 percent butterfat. A ganache made with a chocolate low in cocoa butter benefits from the fat in the heavy cream, while one made with chocolate high in cocoa butter may taste too oily if made with heavy cream. When I use rich Valrhona chocolate, I like to blend two parts heavy cream with one part half-and-half (which has 11 percent butterfat) to get the butterfat content slightly below 30 percent. If you're concerned about the high fat content in ganache, experiment with less fatty creams, which I can assure you will produce very satisfactory results.

Use pasteurized rather than ultrapasteurized cream, if available, because the high heat used in ultrapasteurization can give cream a burnt taste. In any case, use the freshest cream you can find.

## PROPORTIONS

The ratio of cream to chocolate determines the texture of ganache. The more cream you add, the softer the ganache. To achieve the intense flavor and dense texture necessary for truffles, I use anywhere from 7 to 8½ ounces of cream for every 12 ounces of Valrhona chocolate. For a rich cake or pastry glaze that's solid enough to form a thin, hard shell yet soft enough to cut through, equal parts of chocolate and cream work well. Ganaches for cake fillings and frostings are usually light and airy, yet firm enough to support the layers above. While heavier butter cakes call for a ganache with equal parts of chocolate and cream, lighter sponge cakes such as a *génoise* can use a ganache with up to twice as much cream as chocolate.

Since all chocolates differ in composition and density, these proportions are meant only as guidelines, which you



should adapt to your brand of chocolate, to your plan for using the ganache, and to the degree of richness and density that you like.

### MAKING BASIC GANACHE

While the guidelines for the proportions of cream to chocolate are loose, the technique for preparing ganache is not so forgiving.

#### Chop the chocolate.



Break the chocolate into small pieces with the tip of a knife, then chop it into smaller granules in a food processor, pulsing it on and off to avoid overheating and melting the chocolate. If you don't have a food processor, slice the chocolate into thick shavings with a knife. I don't recommend using a



potato peeler or a grater because the very thin pieces that they produce will melt too quickly.

#### Heat the cream.

Slowly bring the cream to a full boil and then let it simmer for about 15 seconds to eliminate any bacteria that may be present. Transfer the cream to a large round-bottomed metal bowl and let it cool for about a minute before mixing in the chocolate.

#### Pour the chocolate onto the hot cream

and wait. You want the finely ground chocolate floating on the cream to start to melt a little bit around the edges before you begin mixing it in. Some people recommend pouring the cream on top of the chocolate instead, but I have found that with more sensitive *couverture* chocolate, the change in temperature is too abrupt and the mixture is liable to curdle.



#### Gradually stir in the chocolate.



Using a plastic or rubber spatula, which won't conduct heat, stir a small amount of chocolate in the center of the bowl into the hot cream with an energetic, circular motion until it becomes shiny. Once you have a well-emulsified pool of

ganache, gradually widen the circles. Stir relentlessly until all the chocolate is melted and the mixture is homogeneous.



The texture of the now-tepid mixture should be smooth and glossy, like an amorphous, melted glass curtain dropping off the spatula.

#### Check for unmelted chocolate.



If all the chocolate doesn't melt before the cream cools off, put the bowl of ganache inside another bowl filled with warm tap water (90° to 95°F). Stir slowly and gently until all the chocolate melts and incorporates into the mixture. If the ganache is glossy, there's little danger that it will separate at this point.

#### Strain the ganache.

For a silky-smooth ganache, pour the mixture through a fine sieve to remove any coagulated bits of cream and air bubbles.

#### Cover the ganache.



If you're not going to use the ganache right away, put a piece of plastic wrap directly on the surface of the ganache to prevent a crust from forming. Let it cool completely before putting it in the refrigerator.

A properly emulsified ganache will stay fresh for about a day at room temperature, a week in the refrigerator, and up to a month in the freezer. Seal the bowl with plastic wrap to prevent moisture and air from entering.

#### ADDING FLAVOR AND TEXTURE

While plain ganache made with high-quality chocolate is wonderful as is, adding well-matched flavors makes the ganache more complex.

##### Infusing flavor.

Ganache can be flavored by steeping fresh herbs such as mint and thyme, seeds such as anise and fennel, citrus peels, vanilla beans, and even coffee and tea in the cream before it's mixed with the chocolate. Here mint leaves are brought to a boil with the cream and left in for 15 minutes to infuse a strong mint flavor. The cream is then strained and measured and any evaporated liquid replenished.



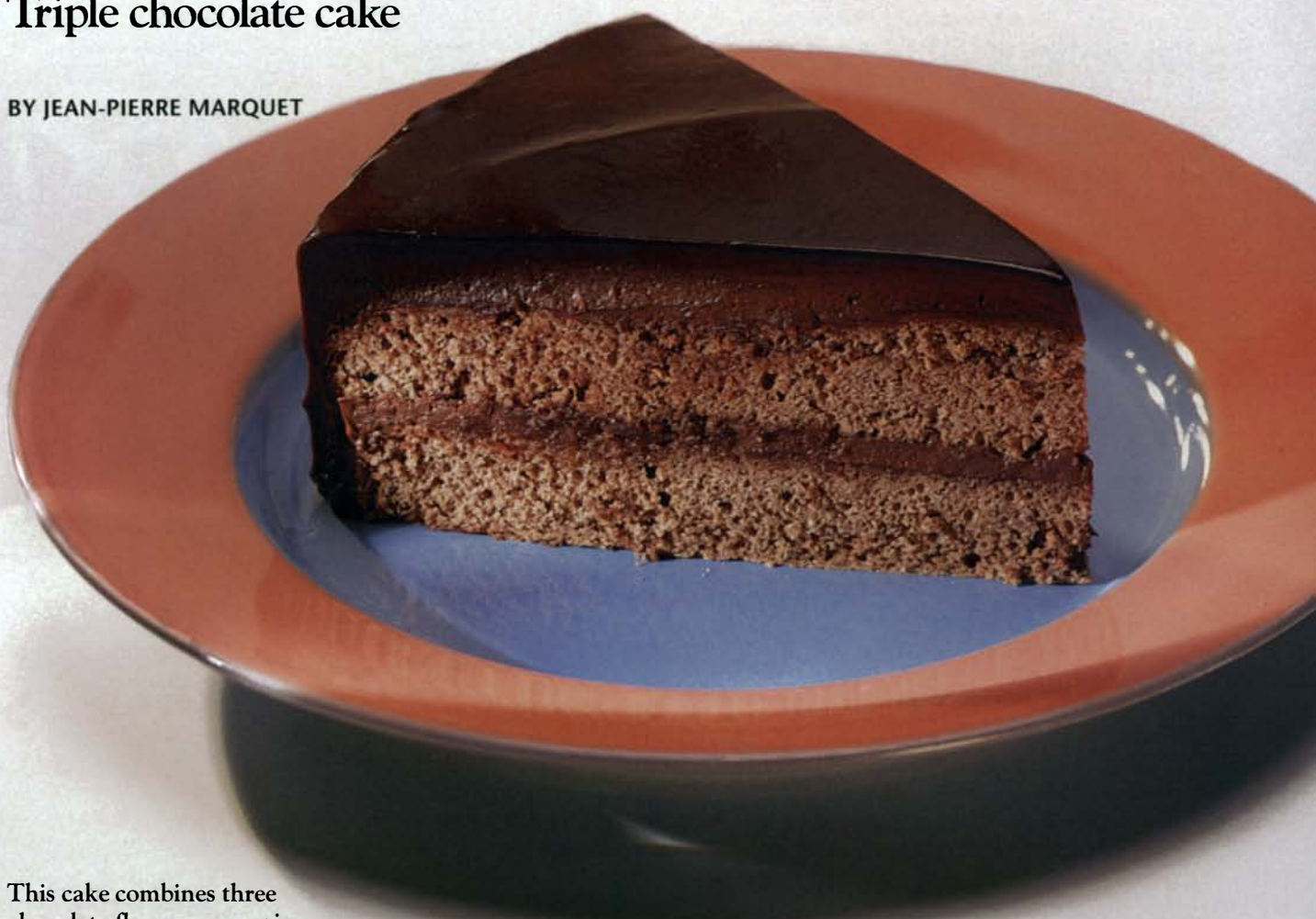
##### Mixing in flavor.

Many flavoring ingredients can be mixed into the ganache once it has cooled completely but has not set (after an hour or two at room temperature). Try mixing in a dash of cognac, Grand Marnier, Cointreau, marc de Champagne, or any other liqueur or *eau de vie*. Small quantities of



# Triple chocolate cake

BY JEAN-PIERRE MARQUET



This cake combines three chocolate flavors—cocoa in the cake layers, semisweet chocolate in the whipped filling, and a less sweet bittersweet chocolate in the glaze. While the contrast gives the cake complexity, you can use the same chocolate for the filling and the glaze if you can't find both semisweet and bittersweet chocolate. All the elements can be made one to two days in advance. In fact, the assembled cake will keep well for a day in the refrigerator.

**GANACHE FILLING:**  
2 cups (16 oz.) heavy cream  
8 oz. semisweet chocolate,  
chopped fine

In a small, heavy saucepan, bring the heavy cream to a boil, and then transfer it to a large bowl.

Let the cream cool briefly (about 1 min.), and then pour the chopped chocolate on top and let it begin to melt. Slowly stir the chocolate and cream in a circular motion, working out from the center of the bowl. Keep stirring until all the chocolate is melted and the ganache is smooth and glossy. Cover the surface with plastic wrap and refrigerate until well chilled—at least two hours.

**CHOCOLATE GÉNOISE CAKE:**  
4 large eggs  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  cup (5 oz.) sugar  
1 cup (4 oz.) all purpose flour  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup (1 oz.) cocoa powder  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup (2 oz.) butter, clarified

Heat oven to 350°F. Grease and flour a 9- by 2-in. round cake pan. In a large mixing bowl set over a pan of simmering water, whisk together the eggs and sugar until the sugar has dissolved and the mixture feels warm to the touch.

Remove the bowl from heat and, using either a hand mixer or the wire whip on a countertop mixer, whip the eggs at high speed until the mixture is thick and forms a ribbon trail when the beater is lifted.

Sift together the flour and the cocoa powder. With a rubber spatula, gently fold the flour mixture into the whipped eggs and sugar, mixing only until the flour is incorporated. Fold in the lukewarm clarified butter.

Immediately pour the batter into the greased and floured cake pan and bake on the middle rack of the oven for 30 to 35 min. When done, the top of the cake will spring back when lightly pressed. Turn the cake out onto a rack, and let cool completely.

**SYRUP:**  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup water  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup (3½ oz.) sugar  
1 to 2 Tbs. rum or other liqueur

In a small, heavy saucepan, heat the water and sugar over medium heat, stirring until the sugar is dissolved. Increase the heat and boil until the syrup is completely clear (about 1 min.). Remove from the heat and, when the syrup is cool, add the rum or other liqueur.

**GANACHE GLAZE:**  
1 cup (8 oz.) heavy cream  
2 Tbs. light corn syrup (optional)  
8 oz. bittersweet chocolate,  
chopped fine

Make the glaze following the instructions for the ganache filling. If you choose to use the corn syrup, which gives the glaze a little more shine, heat it with the heavy cream. Air bubbles in the glaze are very noticeable on the cake, so to prevent their formation, stir the glaze gently. Firmly tap the bowl on the counter several times to release any air bubbles that do form and cover with plastic wrap.



#### TO ASSEMBLE:

To make the cake easier to fill and glaze, place it on a 9-inch cardboard cake circle. Slice the cake with a serrated knife into two even layers. Using a pastry brush, lightly moisten the bottom layer with half the syrup.

With a wirewhisk or the whip attachment on an electric mixer, whip the chilled filling just until stiff peaks form. It's like whipping cream—if you don't whip long enough, it will be soft and flabby, but if you whip too long, the fat separates and the texture gets grainy.

Spread a third of the whipped ganache on the bottom cake layer, and cap it with the top cake layer. Brush the top of the cake with the remaining syrup. Spread the remaining filling over the top and sides of the cake, making the surface as smooth as possible. Chill the cake in the refrigerator for at least an hour before glazing.

**Glazing**—Check the consistency of the glaze by pouring a little over your fingernail. If you can see the outline of your nail through the glaze, the consistency is right. If you can't, you'll need to thin the glaze by heating it over a saucepan of gently simmering water.

Place the cake on a wire rack set on a baking sheet with rims. The glaze will set quickly once it touches the chilled cake, and so you don't have much time to fuss with it. Pour the glaze on the center of the cake, and let it run down the sides. If any gaps remain on the sides, quickly scrape up some glaze from the baking sheet and cover them. Once the cake is completely covered, pick up the cake, including the baking sheet and rack, and gently tap it on the counter to dislodge any air bubbles. Immediately pop any remaining bubbles with a pin. Don't try to smooth out the glaze at this point—you'll only mar it.

Chill the cake in the refrigerator until you're ready to serve it.

*Jean-Pierre Marquet is a pastry chef in New York. He makes this ganache cake at his bakery, Marquet Patisserie, in Brooklyn.*

Photo: John Kane

softened butter, cooked and sweetened fruit purées, soft caramel, dried or candied fruit, and nuts change the texture and add another flavor to ganache.

One of my favorite combinations is chocolate and orange. To get a wonderfully fresh-tasting orange flavor, zest an orange by firmly and briskly rubbing all six sides of a sugar cube against the orange



skin, being careful not to reach the bitter white pith underneath. Continue with a second and third cube until all the zest has been removed. Crush the flavored sugar cubes with 2 tablespoons softened, unsalted butter and keep mashing until the mixture is completely smooth, with no trace of sugar crystals. Gently but thoroughly mix the flavored butter into the ganache.

#### Whipping the ganache.

When the mixture is cold and firm, you may want to beat it briefly with a whisk to aerate it. This extra step gives the ganache a mousseliike consistency. (Don't confuse this with the classic chocolate mousse, which incorporates eggs.) I don't like to work finished ganache too much for fear that it will separate.

#### WHY GANACHE CURDLES

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, the ganache will not form a smooth and glossy emulsion. If it looks wrinkled, dull, and lumpy, it has curdled (see photo above right). It will taste fine when it's warm, but as it cools and hardens, the texture will turn stiff and crumbly, and it won't have the high gloss for which ganache is known.

Ganache curdles when droplets of cocoa butter don't remain well dispersed within the cream. Hot and hu-



mid weather can make emulsification difficult. Ganache made with high-fat *couverture* chocolate is more prone to curdling than ganache made with more stable eating chocolate. Ganache can also curdle if the boiled cream is too hot when mixed with the chocolate, or if the mixture is overbeaten.

I've never had much luck completely restoring curdled ganache. Sometimes stirring in a tablespoon or two of hot cream will make the ganache less wrinkly looking. Another method is to melt the curdled ganache, chill it, and slowly reheat it.

If you're going to eat the ganache right away and don't mind its dull appearance, you can certainly use the curdled ganache. If presentation is very important, or if you're going to let the ganache set for later use, you should make a new batch. Add hot milk to the curdled ganache and you'll have a wonderful hot-chocolate drink.

#### SOURCES FOR CHOCOLATE

**Chocolate Gallery**, 34 West 22nd St., New York, NY 10010; 212/675-CAKE. Catalog available.

**Dean & DeLuca**, 560 Broadway, New York, NY 10012; 800/221-7714. Catalog available.

**Ferncliff House**, PO Box 177, Tremont City, OH 45372; 513/390-6420. Catalog available.

**Maid of Scandinavia**, 3244 Raleigh Ave., Minneapolis, MN 55416-2299; 800/328-6722. Catalog available.

**Maison Glass**, 111 E. 58th St., New York, NY 10022; 800/U-CALL-MG.

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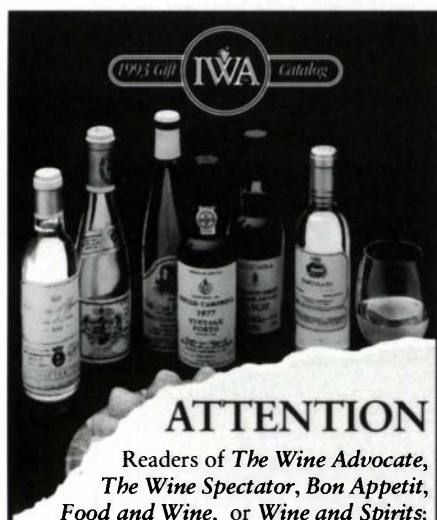


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In this department, experts define cooking terms and describe basic techniques. Where needed, they supply foundation recipes and, where appropriate, variations.

## Roasting, Peeling, and Seeding Eggplant



*Lift the eggplant's seed cluster and slice it from the flesh. A gentle touch will keep the cluster intact for easier removal.*

Smoky roasted eggplant is a delicious addition to many dishes, but preparing it can be a messy chore if not undertaken with a systematic approach and a sharp paring knife.

The best heat source for roasting eggplant is an outdoor grill fueled by a fragrant wood, but a regular gas range will do the trick nicely, as well. A third, but less satisfactory, method is to use your broiler; position the eggplant as close to the heat as possible. If you're using a gas stove, line the burners first with aluminum foil.

The goal when roasting eggplant is to preserve as much as possible of the natural shape of the eggplant because it will be much easier to peel and seed if its structure is intact. Place the eggplant directly on the burner with the flame set to low and leave it to char. Carefully turn it by the stem to char the entire surface. Make sure the eggplant is thoroughly blackened on all sides, but don't cook it so long that it loses its shape and becomes mushy. Set it aside to cool completely.

To peel off the skin, put the eggplant on a cutting board, pinch a piece of skin, and pull down lengthwise with the grain, being careful not to tear the flesh, which can make seed removal more difficult. Any small specks of charred skin may be blotted away with a dry paper towel or simply left to blend in with the flesh.

To remove the seeds, trim off the stem and insert a sharp paring knife halfway through the eggplant. Make an incision that runs down the length of the eggplant. Gently fold back the eggplant halves so it opens like a book. You will see clusters of seeds running lengthwise. With your fingertips, lightly stroke down the seed lines to separate them from the flesh. Insert the tip of your paring knife at about a 20° angle just under the seeds and slice along one side to separate the seeds from the flesh. Slice down the other side of the seed cluster to release it entirely.

Finally, appraise your work. A few scattered seeds will do no harm, but too many—particularly mature ones that are hard and bitter—will detract from the sweet silkiness of good roasted eggplant.

—Kaysey McLoughlin, private chef and caterer in Pulaski, Tennessee.

## Making Clarified Butter

Clarified butter, sometimes called drawn butter, is regular butter that has been treated to remove any nonfat elements in order to improve its qualities as a cooking medium. Butter has two main components: butterfat and milk proteins; there's also a lot of water, sometimes up to 18 percent. Salted butter of course contains salt, too; for clarified butter, use only unsalted, as salt can lower the smoking point of the finished product and defeat the purpose of clarifying.

Without the milk proteins, clarified butter can be heated to higher temperatures without forming brown specks or eventually burning, so it's good for gentle sautéing, or for more vigorous frying when mixed with a little olive or vegetable oil to boost its smoking point.

The standard method for making clarified butter is to melt the butter gently in a sturdy saucepan until you see the butterfat separating out and forming a thick layer in the pan. Most of the milk

solids will drop to the bottom of the pan, and a layer of white foam will form on top. Remove the pan from the heat—gently, so you don't disturb the layers—spoon off the top layer of foam, and carefully pour off the pure butterfat into a clean container. Discard the milky residue from the bottom of the pan.

Another method is to melt the butter and then actually boil it until the milk solids coagulate and clump together at the bottom of the pan and the butterfat floats on top. If this method is taken further to the point where the milk proteins harden and darken slightly, the butterfat intensifies in flavor and color and is known as *ghee*, which is a mainstay of Indian cooking. The smoking point of ghee is slightly higher than that of regular clarified butter. Again, carefully decant the clarified butter and discard the milky leftovers, or strain it through a sieve lined with paper towel or cheesecloth.

Once you've made clarified butter, you can store it in the refrigerator for several weeks, but be sure to keep it covered because fat absorbs odors easily. Use it for sautéing, for flavoring cake or crêpe batters, for tossing with steamed vegetables, or for brushing on a piece of poached fish for moisture and shine.

—Martha Holmberg, *Fine Cooking*

## Sugar Syrups

Many dessert recipes call for sugar syrup. It can moisten, sweeten, add texture, and even be used as a cooking medium. Sugar syrup is made by dissolving sugar in water or another liquid, bringing it just to a boil, and then taking it immediately from the heat, with no appreciable water evaporation. (Some chefs call this type of syrup a "simple" syrup. I use the term simple syrup to refer to a syrup made with a one-to-one ratio of sugar to water.) A sugar syrup is different from a "cooked-sugar syrup," in which the syrup is boiled for a longer time, so that the water begins to evaporate and the syrup takes on new characteristics, described by terms like "soft ball" or "hard ball."

Cooked-sugar syrups are used for making confections that require a lot of body, like Italian meringue, buttercream icings, and especially candies. Sugar syrups are mainly used to imbibe (moist-

en) baked goods, to sweeten and produce the right texture in ices and sorbets, and to poach fruit.

You can flavor a sugar syrup with many ingredients—fresh herbs, spices, or alcohols are popular choices. To infuse a syrup with something nonalcoholic, add the flavoring to the hot syrup and leave to infuse for several minutes or up to 12 hours, depending on how easily the item gives off flavor. For example, a bunch of fresh mint would only need 15 to 20 minutes infusion, while something tougher like star anise might benefit from an overnight soak. For flavoring with alcohol, such as liqueur or brandy, add it only to cool syrup: alcohol dissipates with heat, so the full flavor would be lost if added to a hot syrup.

To make a syrup for imbibing cakes and other pastries, such as *savarins* or *babas au rhum*, bring one part sugar and one part water to a boil in a sturdy, scrupulously clean pot. Dirt or other foreign matter on pots or utensils can cause the sugar to crystallize, as can

undissolved sugar. If you see any sugar crystals on the side of the pan, wash them down with a natural-bristle pastry brush and a little water; synthetic brushes lose bristles easily. Stir until the sugar dissolves, but not after the syrup comes to a boil, because more stirring can also cause crystallization. When the syrup has boiled and is perfectly clear, take it off the heat. Some chefs add a few drops of lemon juice to the syrup; the acid in the lemon juice helps prevent early crystallization. Crystallization is more likely to occur in a cooked-sugar syrup, where the sugar content is very high, but it's a good idea to take precautions with all syrups. Cool the imbibing syrup to room temperature and store it in the refrigerator. The syrup will last almost indefinitely, but take care to keep it tightly covered because it can easily absorb odors.

To imbibe a cake, brush on the syrup, using a daubing stroke. A three-layer cake will take one half to one cup of syrup.

Sugar syrups are often used when

making sorbets and granitas, both as a sweetener and as a means of controlling texture. Sugar affects freezing, so the right amount of sugar syrup will produce a flavorful ice that is soft enough to scoop and shape. The ratio of sugar to water will vary according to the sweetness of the base mixture, but a range of 25 to 50 percent sugar should yield the right balance of sweetness and texture.

For poaching fruit, a ratio of one part sugar to four parts liquid is standard. In poaching fruit, however, sometimes much of the water is replaced by wine, champagne, or fruit juice. Once the fruit is prepared, place it in the hot syrup and simmer slowly until the fruit is soft. The fruit is best if left to cool in the syrup overnight to enhance both flavor and appearance.

The syrups for ices and poaching fruit are made using the same method as for the imbibing syrup.

—Meridith Ford, Chef-Instructor at the International Baking and Pastry Institute at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island. ♦

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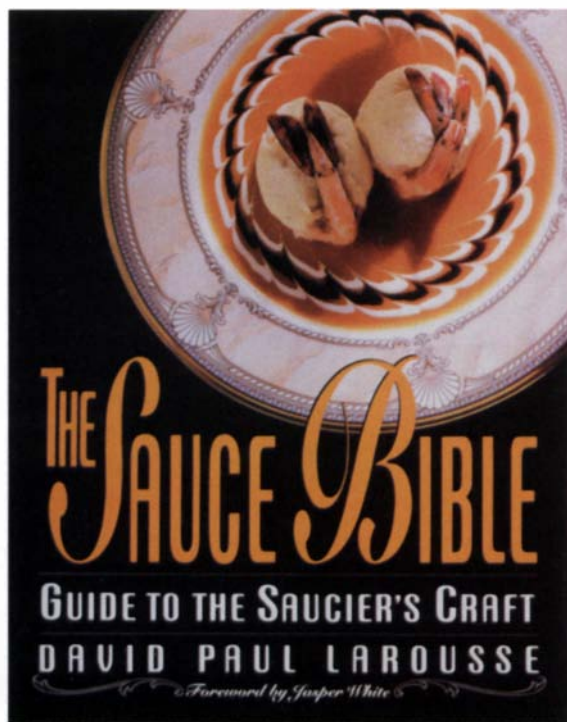
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# Cookbooks with Sauce



Almost every course of a meal can include a sauce, from vinaigrettes to pesto to hot fudge sauce, but making many traditional sauces is intimidating, and knowing how to make the right sauce for the right dish can be a challenge. In the past few years, three notable books have been published that address making and serving sauces.

***The Sauce Bible—Guide to the Saucier's Craft***, by David Paul Larousse. JOHN WILEY & SONS, 1993. \$50, HARDCOVER; 384 PP ISBN 0-471-57228-4.

With such a name, *The Sauce Bible* invites high expectations. Unfortunately, it doesn't deliver. While the book is overflowing with information, that information is inadequately organized and often incomplete, making the book perhaps a good reference for the already proficient saucemaker, but not for the cook looking to learn more.

The chapters are organized by sauce type, including French classics, such as brown sauce, cream sauce, and compound butter, and non-French sauce types, such as pesto, salsa, and relish. The recipes in each chapter are organized around master recipes, followed

by variations. The latter are not actually recipes, but brief descriptions with no instructions or amounts given. For example, the "recipe" for Countess Sauce is merely "Fish velouté flavored with lemon juice, mounted with anchovy butter." Some recipes appearing in different areas of the book have the same names, without explanation. For example, there are four different Riche-lieu sauces, three Bercy sauces, and two Aurora sauces. On the other hand, there are four identical recipes for *crème fraîche*, plus a fifth one with an unexplained modification.

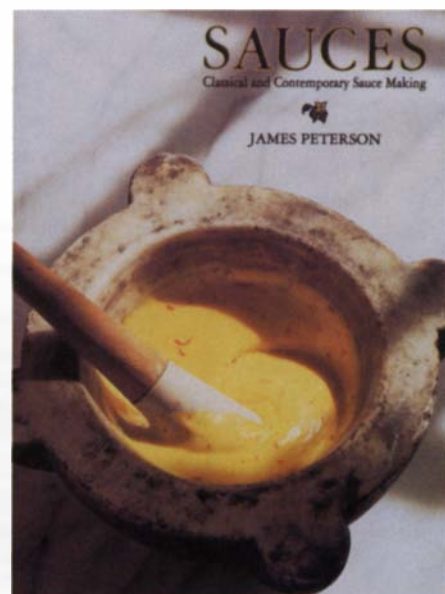
Nine pages of the book are devoted to a useful discussion of thickening agents, from starches like flour and cornstarch to more esoteric thickeners like foie gras and lobster tomalley. Larousse also includes some fifty recipes for dishes to serve with sauces, including a lobster strudel and a chicken liver mousse.

A curious feature of the book is that all the sauces are designated by English titles instead of French ones. At first glance, this might seem a welcome change for the non-francophone reader, but it soon becomes silly when referring to Dutch Sauce (*hollandaise*), Butcher Sauce (*sauce charcutière*) and Chief Ranger Sauce (*sauce grand veneur*). Another annoying feature of the book is that none of the recipes indicate the final yield or number of servings. An experienced cook could deduce this information, but a novice would benefit from some guidance by the author.

While Larousse's emphasis is on traditional sauces, he does include "contemporary innovations" on the French classics. The book also includes an illustrated section on sauce painting, defined by the author as "an arrangement of two or more sauces on a serving dish, manipulated into a visually stunning design." Sixteen pages of color photographs demonstrate this artistry with sauces.

The book does provide insight into how a professional approaches sauce-making, but as the instructions are cryptic and require extensive knowledge on the part of the reader, *The Sauce Bible* doesn't live up to the promise of its name.

***Sauces—Classic and Contemporary Sauce Making***, by James Peterson. VAN NOSTRAND REINHOLD, 1991. \$39.95, HARDCOVER; 504 PP ISBN 0-442-23773-1.



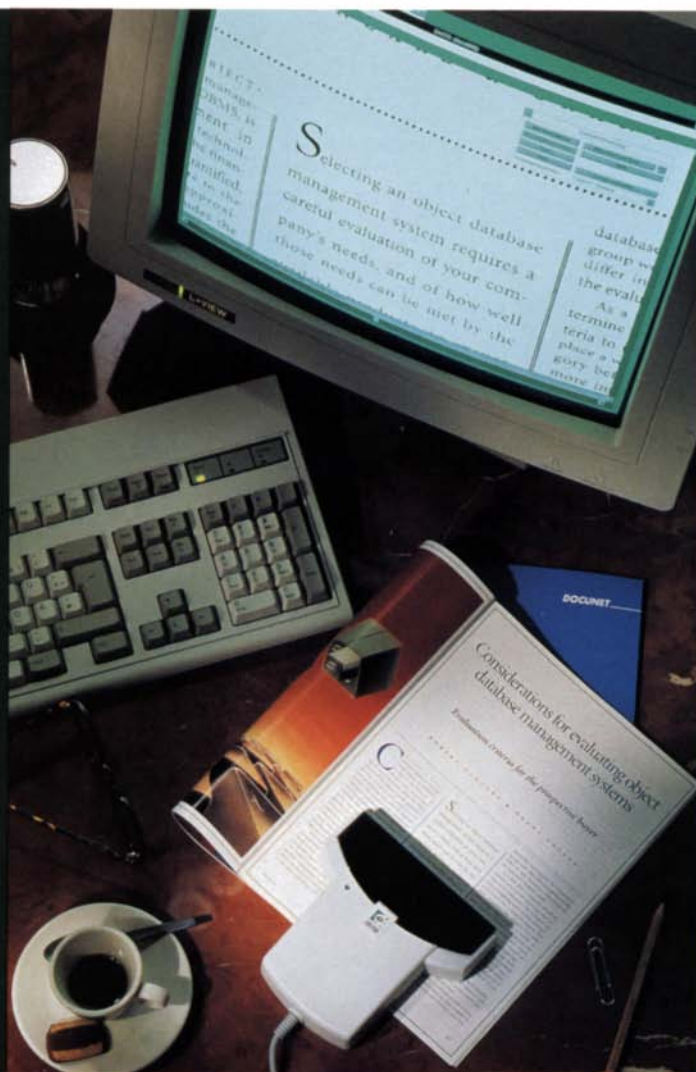
*Sauces* is a true sauce bible—a thorough treatise on sauce recipes, techniques, and history. Although the book is written with professionals in mind, it's easily accessible to home cooks. The book is organized by classic French sauce types, with two chapters that include non-French sauces like salsas, puréed sauces, and infused oils. Peterson's writing is crystal-clear and informative, and his instructions are flexible. While he offers structured recipes, he also includes notes on the many variations of and possibilities for a given dish.

Ingredients for master recipes are listed with both American measurements and metric equivalents, and methods are clearly presented and quite detailed, in-

(Continued on page 76)

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cluding advice like keeping a bowl of cold water by the stock pot so that you can rinse your ladle each time you skim the stock. The recipe variations indicate how much of an additional ingredient to add to the basic recipe, and when. This attention to detail can give the sauce-making initiate the confidence to attempt a tricky sauce and can also educate the more experienced chef, if not in the "hows" of classic sauce technique, then in the "whys."

Occasionally, the book includes non-sauce recipes to exemplify particular techniques. Two chapters are devoted to "integral" sauces for meat and for fish, which are made from juices released by the food while it's cooking. For example, the burgundy-based braising liquid for Coq au Vin is reduced to a flavorful sauce. Sea Scallops à la Nage are poached in and served with the same vegetable broth.

The clarity and depth of Peterson's information provides the reader with valuable technical saucemaking recipes,

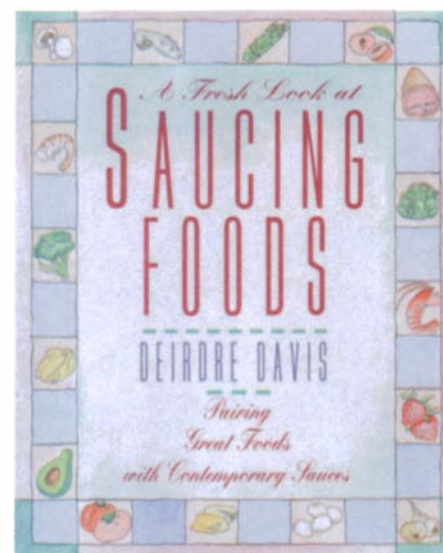
along with a wealth of general culinary information. *Sauces* is an essential—and fun-to-read—reference for anyone serious about cooking.

**A Fresh Look at Saucing Foods**, by Deirdre Davis. ADDISON WESLEY, 1993. \$25. HARDCOVER; 386 PP. ISBN 0-201-57710-0.

Deirdre Davis has an extensive professional knowledge of saucing, yet she manages to make complicated techniques unthreatening to the home cook. While many of her sauces have their foundations in classic French method, she offers a more contemporary and eclectic approach to saucing and cooking than do Peterson and Larousse. What's more, her recipes are great.

The first part of the book contains master recipes on sauce elements such as stocks and essences, and chapters on sauce categories including tomato sauces, reduction sauces, flavored oils, and yogurt and sour cream sauces.

The second part of the book consists of nine chapters organized by course.



Each recipe, be it for salad, potatoes, beef, or cake, is accompanied by its own sauce recipe.

Davis's recipes are not only inspiring in their originality, but also in their overall simplicity. A few are more complex, but most follow relatively streamlined

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procedures that yield fantastic results. Virtually every recipe concludes with a section listing several sauce and recipe combinations. For example, for a simple roast chicken, she suggests six possible accompaniments, any of which can be prepared while the bird cooks. These include a curry and cranberry sauce garnished with toasted almonds, a red wine sauce made with dried mushrooms, an Indian-inspired yogurt sauce, a spicy lemon aioli, an essence of chicken and citrus, and a cider, apple, and ginger sauce. The ease and creativity of Davis' recipes extend to desserts as well as savory dishes, as in the refreshing Orange and Lime Cake with Mango and Lime Sauce.

The technical aspects of *A Fresh Look at Saucing Foods* make the basics of traditional sauces accessible to the busy home cook. The wealth of innovative recipes will inspire the cook to integrate delicious sauces into day-to-day cooking.

—Lisë Stern, editor of "The Cookbook Review," a bimonthly newsletter published in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

## Celebrating Alaskan Food

*The Riversong Lodge Cookbook*, by Kirsten Dixon. ALASKA NORTHWEST BOOKS, 1993. \$22.95, HARDCOVER; 270 PP. ISBN 0-882-40431-8.

"Good food doesn't have to be complex or expensive. In fact, the simplest of fresh, nutritious foods can often bring the greatest aesthetic pleasure," says Chef Kirsten Dixon in her new book, *The Riversong Lodge Cookbook*. Dixon has been called "one of America's ten best young chefs" by *Esquire* magazine, and she hails not from one of our cosmopolitan culinary meccas, but from a log fishing lodge named Riversong just outside of Anchorage, Alaska.

Kirsten Dixon's cookbook is a testament to building a top-notch culinary locale in the Alaska bush. Riversong Lodge is a long way from the nearest grocery store. If they can't grow it or catch it nearby, they don't serve it, so there's a very real tie to the seasons in these pages. You'll feel the heavy chill of winter as you read about White Bean Chili, Moose

Stew, and Real Hot Chocolate, then feel the relief and celebration of summer, when the thaw subsides and Wildflower Pasta, Summer Squash with Lamb and Herb Stuffing, and White Chocolate Rose Petal Tart come on the scene.

Scattered throughout the seasonal chapters are engaging vignettes on life at Riversong, including experiences with native wildlife, local legends, memorable meals, and the special experiences that come with running a lodge and raising a family in the shadow of Mt. McKinley. This cookbook embodies Dixon's sophisticated talents and simple pleasures in all the best foods that Alaska has to offer. She and her husband have created a unique, perfect haven for the avid fisherman or anyone interested in getting away from it all. Preparing her exceedingly satisfying recipes should bring some of Riversong's rustic sophistication into your kitchen and perhaps remind you of what it means to cook with the seasons and from the heart.

—Cynthia Nims, Seattle, Washington. ♦

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# Bay Leaf

Bay leaves have been held in high esteem throughout history. In Greek mythology, Apollo wore a wreath of laurel leaves in dedication to Daphne, who was turned into a tree to escape his embrace. So began the tradition of wearing crowns of laurel as symbols of honor.

The European or true bay leaf, *Laurus nobilis*, comes from a species of medium-size, aromatic, evergreen tree, which is native to the Mediterranean area. Here in the United States, there are shrubs and trees whose leaves are frequently used as substitutes for bay. In the low country of South Carolina and Georgia, the red bay, *Persea borbonia*, is used to add spicy overtones to the regional cuisine. The same is true of Mexican laurel, *Litsea glaucescens*, which grows throughout Mexico and is used as a bay substitute there and in southern Texas. There is a third substitute, California laurel, *Umbellularia californica*, with longer, more slender, pointed leaves. This variety contains a proven neurotoxin, however, and should not be used in quantity.

The European bay leaf has long enjoyed a reputation as a valuable herb, partly due to its essential oil, which contains 1,8-cineole, alpha terpinyl acetate and linalool, plus traces of eugenol, giving it antibacterial properties, as well as mild sedative and narcotic qualities. These impart overtones of eucalyptus, lavender, bergamot, and clove fragrance, which make it such a useful culinary herb and help to prevent bacterial contamination.

I use bay leaf in beef stews, soups such as *bouillabaisse*, tomato-based sauces, shellfish boils, and in roasting or braising meats, including game, veal, and pork. Bay is nearly always found in the spice mixtures for making pickles. The traditional French herb combination *bouquet garni* always includes a bay leaf, and bay is

indispensable in making *court bouillons* for poaching fish, meats, and vegetables. I even like to infuse the milk used in desserts such as puddings, where bay's inimitable herbal clovelike flavor prompts people to ask, "What's in this?"

Unlike most herbs, fresh bay leaves are more concentrated than dried bay leaves, so less of the fresh bay is needed when substituting amounts in recipes. When using bay leaves in cooking, leave them whole so they can be easily removed from the food. If you must crumble them to release the oils, then wrap the bits in cheesecloth.

Bay trees are root hardy to about 20°F. However, they will lose their leaves if exposed to frost. You can grow potted bay trees in your home, and I encourage you to do so, as there is simply no substitute for fresh bay leaves in cooking. Plant the

## LAURUS NOBILIS

The female bay tree has dark purple or black fruit.



tree in well-drained potting soil and during the winter, keep in a cool, well-lighted area.

In summer, move the plant outside to partial shade and water it frequently. Fertilize with an organic fertilizer, such as fish emulsion, during the two to three active growth spurts that occur during the year.

If you've never used fresh bay leaves in cooking, then you're in for a real taste treat. The complex flavor, with the hint of eucalyptus, clove, and lavender, is almost nonexistent in dried bay leaves, and it is this quality of the fresh leaf that imparts that incomparable depth of flavor and bouquet to so many foods.

Patricia K. Reppert, owner of Shale Hill Farm & Herb Gardens in Saugerties, New York, is president of the International Herb Growers & Marketers Association. She has a daily cooking program on radio station WGHQ 92AM in Kingston, New York. ♦

*Sponsoring an event that you want readers to know about? Send an announcement to Calendar, Fine Cooking, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506. Be sure to include dates, a complete address, and the phone number to call for more information. Listings are free, but restricted to events of direct interest to cooks. We go to press three months before the issue date of the magazine and must be notified well in advance. The deadline for entries in the August/September issue is May 1.*

## CALIFORNIA

**Conference**—Annual Conference of the International Association of Culinary Professionals, April 20–24, The Fairmont, San Francisco. For information, call 502/581-9786.

## COLORADO

**Festival**—The Aspen Food & Wine Festival, June 17–19. For information, call 800/4-WINE-94.

## CONNECTICUT

**Festival**—The 5th Annual Heublein Grand Chefs Festival, May 31 through June 9, Hartford. Chef authors paired with local restaurants for special meals and presentations. For information, call 203/525-8200.

## FLORIDA

**Festival and auction**—Florida Winefest & Auction, April 21–23, Resort at Long Boat Key Club, Sarasota. For information, call 813/922-6211.

## LOUISIANA

**Festival**—The Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival, May 6–8. For information, call 318/332-6655.

## MASSACHUSETTS

**Conference**—"The Chef and the Earth: Friendly Food, Products, and Services." Northeastern Regional Conference of the American Culinary Federation, April 9–11, Park Plaza Hotel, Boston. Seminars, trade show. For information, call Irwin Gelber, 617/576-8802.

## MICHIGAN

**Festival**—The National Morel Mushroom Festival, May 13–15, Sunset Park, Boyne City. Foraging for wild edibles, National Morel Mushroom Hunting Championship, other events. For information, call 616/582-6222.

## NEW YORK

**Classes**—French Culinary Institute, 462 Broadway, New York City. Career programs leading to a grande diplôme. Nine months beginning May 12, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, 5:30 P.M. to 10:30 P.M.; six months beginning May 20, Monday through Friday 8:30 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. For information, call 212/219-8890.

**Dinners, awards ceremony, and reception**—Beard Birthday Fortnight commemorating the birthday of the late James Beard, April 23 through May 5, various locations in New York City. For schedule of events, contact The James Beard Foundation, 167 West 12th St., New York, NY 10011; 212/675-4984.

**Classes**—China Institute in America, 125 East 65th St., New York City. Basic Chinese Cooking, six weekly sessions May 10 through June 7. For information, call 212/744-8181.

## PENNSYLVANIA

**Festival**—Rhubarb Festival, May 21, Kitchen Kettle Village, Intercoarse. Rhubarb cooking contest, other events. For information, call 800/732-3538.

## RHODE ISLAND

**Symposium, recipe contest**—Symposium on food trends, April 15; National High School Recipe Contest, April 16. College of Culinary Arts, Johnson & Wales University, Providence. For information, call Linda Beaulieu, 401/455-2919.

## TENNESSEE

**Festival**—9th annual River Roast, May 20–21, Ross's Landing, Chattanooga. Barbecue cook-off competition, music, river activities. Call 615/265-4397.

## TEXAS

**Workshops**—Blanco River Cooking School, Rte. 4, Box 1745, Wimberley. Seafood and Tropical Fruit, April 16; Eclectic Contemporary Cuisine, April 17; An Exploration of the Wonders and Pleasures of the Mediterranean Table, May 21. Call 512/847-2583.

## WASHINGTON, DC AREA

**Classes**—Peter Kump's School of Culinary Arts at Sutton Place Gourmet, 10323 Old Georgetown Rd., Bethesda. Techniques of French Cooking I, April 28 through May 26; Techniques of French Cooking II, April 27 through May 25. Call 703/823-5647.

## WEST VIRGINIA

**Classes**—La Varenne at The Greenbrier, White Sulphur Springs. Five-day sessions running consecutively from April 10–29. Guest chefs, wine tastings. For information, call 800/624-6070, ext. 7863.

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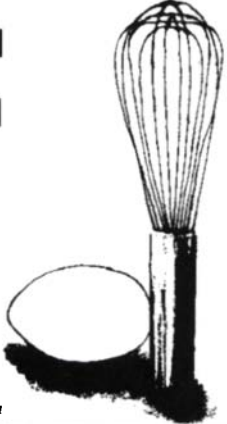
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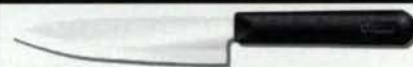
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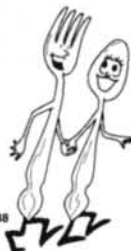
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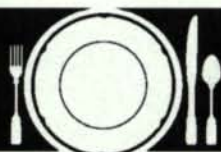
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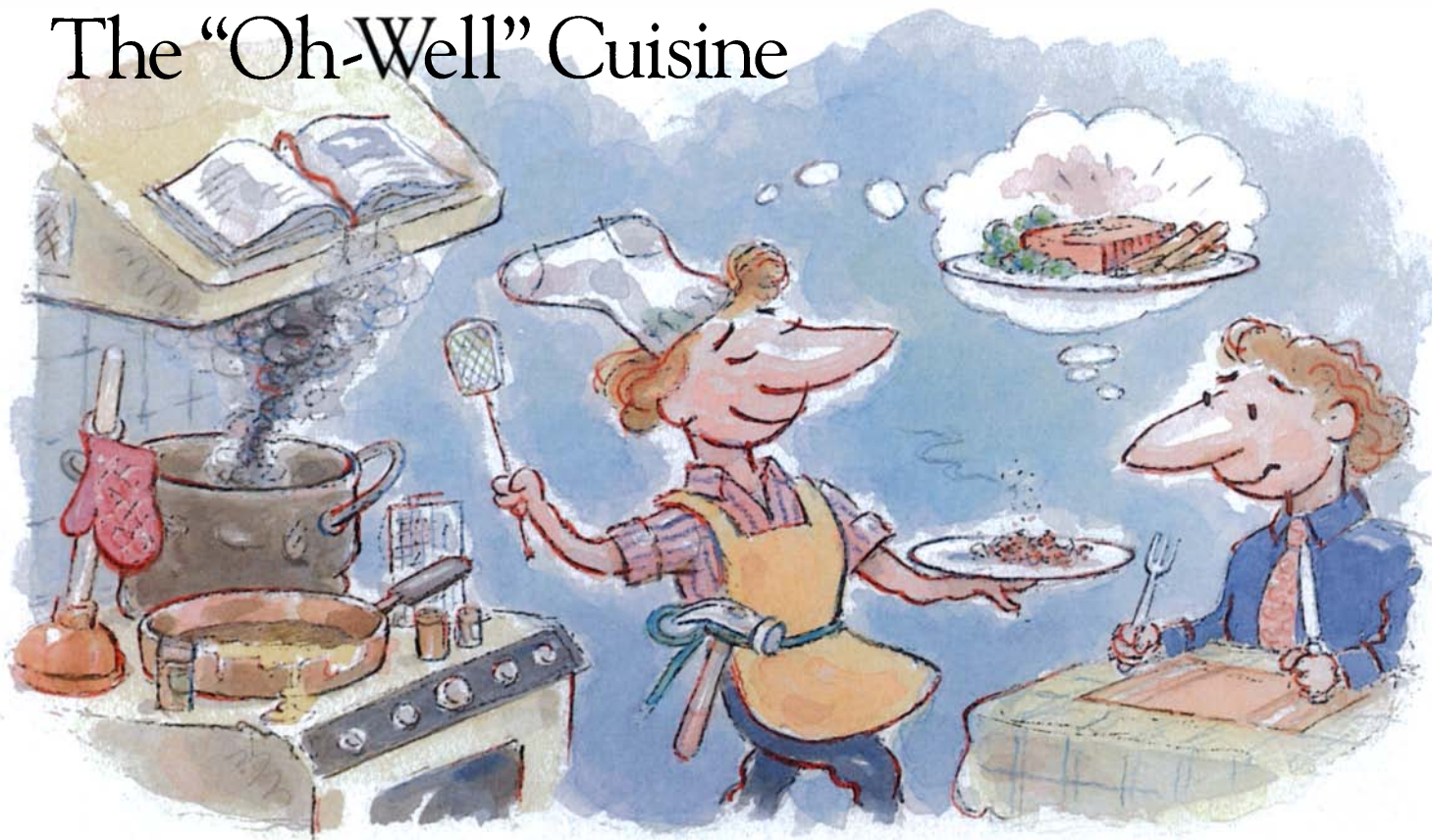
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# The “Oh-Well” Cuisine



One rusted iron skillet, a dented aluminum spaghetti pot, and a slightly melted plastic spatula were all the cooking equipment I had in my bachelor's apartment. In 1981, inspired by the “nouvelle cuisine” movement, I boldly strode into this sorry excuse for a kitchen with great ambition to prepare extraordinary meals.

My first attempt at making veal stock in the spaghetti pot was a scorched mess. I threw a bunch of potatoes and carrots in it and called it “veal soup.” Another time, I cooked salmon steaks in the unseasoned iron skillet without any oil. I called the resulting mess “salmon hash”—tasty, but a little weak on presentation.

My roommate actually enjoyed eating my nouvelle cuisine disasters. We had a lot of laughs comparing the food we were eating to what the cookbook described. I named my style of cooking “oh-well” instead of nouvelle, because “oh well” was what I said as I served up my latest failed experiment.

Over time, my cooking improved. I never had the money to buy the kitchen equipment I needed, but somehow I got better at getting by with what I had—or what I could find lying around the house.

Like the time I made a kiwi purée for a

dessert. I peeled the fuzzy little fruits with a steak knife and mashed them up in my bar blender. But I couldn't figure out how to get all those nasty little black seeds out—I didn't own a strainer. Company was on the way, so I got creative. I ripped the nylon mesh out of a screen door in the garage and squeezed the purée through it—not altogether sanitary, but very effective.

The triumph of my bachelor innovations was a dessert called Pink Pears with Dark Chocolate. The dish featured pears poached in red wine served on a bed of shaved chocolate curls. Poaching the pears was easy enough, but the shaved chocolate required some ingenuity.

The recipe specified a marble cutting board and a long, flexible icing spatula to spread the chocolate, neither of which I owned. The idea was to spread melted chocolate over a slick surface with the spatula and then shave it off into curls.

I searched the house for a slick surface. After some scrounging around, I finally spotted the glass shelf in the bottom of the refrigerator over the crisper drawers. I cleaned it up and pressed it into service.

Now for the matter of the spatula. The melted plastic one I used to flip eggs didn't work. A credit card was too stiff. But one of

those subscription cards that are forever falling out of magazines spread the chocolate perfectly. The dessert was delicious.

Eventually I acquired a decent pot or two and even broke down and bought a strainer. The little money I saved I spent on restaurants where I could sample the cooking of superstars. My understanding of cooking grew and so did my repertoire.

Now I still make mistakes in my cooking, but they tend to be less drastic than they used to be. Yet I will always remember the lessons I learned cooking the “oh-well” cuisine: good cooking does not require the most expensive equipment. When people serve their failed experiments, be tolerant. And raw fish glues itself to hot iron.

But most of all, cooking the “oh-well” cuisine taught me about humility. Cooking is an erratic art form. Sometimes the results are so wonderful they surprise even you. And sometimes, no matter how big a chef you are, you fall on your face. Then you just serve it up and say, “Oh well.”

—Robb Walsh is the food editor of the *Austin Chronicle* in Texas. ♦

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OUR CHEESE AND BASIL TORTELLONI IS A WORK OF ART. A MASTERPIECE THAT'S ALWAYS FRESHLY MADE AND REFRIGERATED TO STAY THAT WAY, FOR A TENDERHEARTED TASTE THAT'S HARD TO RESIST. TRY IT WITH OUR LUSCIOUS, NEW PESTO WITH SUN DRIED TOMATOES, CREATED BY THE CHEFS AT CASA BUITONI, OUR CULINARY ARTS CENTER IN THE TUSCANY REGION OF ITALY. IT'S EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO CREATE A LITTLE GENIUS OF YOUR OWN.





# A blissful union

of artistic and confectionery skills is what Ricki Arno of Rosie's Creations, New York City, uses to create her magnificent celebration cakes. On this 37-inch-high wedding cake, the bride and groom are sculpted from sugar and their faces are painted with food coloring to resemble the real happy couple. Their bridal finery is made from hand-cut and draped sugar, too, as is the three-tiered floral garden in which they exchange their marriage vows.

